

# Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

Vol. 61 No. 4 2017



The Final Farewell





## **For presentations at CHS 2018 convention program**

Members and others who desire to make a presentation at the 2018 Circus Historical Society convention are invited to submit a proposal by March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018 for consideration.

Presentations will be made on Thursday and Friday, July 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. They are to be nominally 20 minutes in length, with time allowed afterwards for questions and answers.

Longer time blocks may be available upon request and demonstrated need.

Papers that are read, PowerPoint type programs, and other visual-based presentations are possible. All required technology to make the presentation, hardware and/or software, is to be clearly specified in the proposal. Would-be presenters should also provide an abstract of their work.

Preference will be given to presenters who will submit the text of their presentation for publication in the CHS's journal, *Bandwagon*.

All presenters will need to submit the title of their presentation, their formal name and title as it is to appear in the program, and a 300 to 400 word biographical sketch no later than May 30, 2018.

**Send all proposals and other information to**

Fred Dahlinger, Jr.; Convention Program Chair; 451 Roblee Road; Baraboo WI 53193  
or email to [circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com).

Questions will be taken at 608-356-1030 during normal business hours (CST).



# Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society  
2017 Volume 61, Number 4

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An index of Bandwagon  
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by Chris Berry





# Circus Historical Society

[circushistory.org](http://circushistory.org)

## Mission Statement

*"To preserve, promote, and share  
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cultural significance of the circus and  
allied arts, past and present."*

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## From the Editor

In years past, *Bandwagon* editors supplied our membership with wonderfully detailed year end reviews, describing the highs and lows of the season. It was a tradition that spoke to the connect- edness of the past and the present. Through the tireless efforts and extraordinary passion of Chris Berry, this issue provides that insight on the final season of the two units of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. From the First of May ringmaster visiting the site of the Hartford Fire to the circus veteran who recognized the gravity of his perfor- mance as the last clown on a Ringling show, there is a special thread that connects these stories to those of earlier circus history.

Here also you will find contributions from long time CHS members Robert Kitchen and Dan Draper. Both of these authors have dedicated years to teasing out the briefest of newspaper entries in the most obscure of publications in order to trace the history of some of the early performers of the American circus. With this en- try on the early American clown Archie Campbell, Dan Draper will have published 44 articles in our journal since 1973. Without the efforts of members like these we would not have *Bandwagon*.

I owe thanks first and foremost to the authors of this issue, par- ticularly Chris Berry who, in taking on the massive task of docu- menting the 2017 season, gave me a new respect for this final year of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Greg Parkinson, with his eye for details, has been of great help in the editing process. Pete Shrake at Circus World and Matthew Wittmann at Harvard's Houghton Library were both wonderfully helpful in securing images for this issue. And a special thanks to John and Mardi Wells for their talent and exper- tise.

This issue is my 19<sup>th</sup> as editor of *Bandwagon*. I was privileged to begin my tenure with Stuart Thayer's marvelous study on the history of Adam Forepaugh and I am very proud to end it with this issue and the chance to work with these authors. I want to thank Fred Pfening III for entrusting me with this role, as I firmly believe that without the hard work of both he and his father, the journal would not exist today. I also owe a great deal of thanks to Deborah Walk and The Ringling Museum for supporting my efforts and to Fred Dahlinger for being a wonderful resource and sounding board. There are many others who have been supportive and helpful in countless ways. I can't begin to list you all, but please know how grateful I am.

With 2018 Greg Parkinson will take on the role of editor of *Bandwagon*. His assistance has been integral to these last two is- sues. In collaborating for a few months, I have found Greg to be wonderfully insightful, thoughtful, and genuinely concerned with producing the best possible publication. I know he is going to do a wonderful job.

JLP



## About the covers

The intersection of tradition and evolution. To be successful, circuses have always had to balance the excitement of new and different with the expectations of nostalgia and memory. In an age when changes happen so rapidly, this is a nearly impossible feat. Talent and diversity have always characterized the performers and types of acts on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows.

To address the diversity of the American population and keep up with the times, in 1999 the Feld family introduced the first African American ringmaster, Johnathan Lee Iverson, seen on our back cover in a performance of *Out of This World*. Iverson was only 22 years old when he first donned the classic top hat. He performed thirteen seasons with *The Greatest Show on Earth*, performing about

450 shows each year. It was Iverson, who had already made history as a “first,” who was the last ringmaster to close a show with the iconic farewell from *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

On December 14, 2016 Feld Entertainment, Inc. announced that “Kristen Michelle Wilson [would] join Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey’s *Circus Xtreme* and become the first-ever female ringmaster in the brand’s 146-year history.”<sup>1</sup> The press release heralded Wilson for her “talent and enthusiastic energy.” Wilson, featured on our front cover, performed with the circus for the first time on January 12, 2017 in Orlando, Florida. Two days later came the announcement of the show’s closing. Given the shortened tour schedule, no program was sold with Wilson on the cover. Nevertheless, her place in circus history is secured as the first and only female ringmaster of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.



Front cover photograph,  
Kristen Michelle Wilson on  
*Circus Xtreme*

Dan Kleintop

Back cover photograph,  
Johnathan Lee Iverson on  
*Out of This World*

Fred Serex

### Endnotes

1. Feld Entertainment, Inc.  
“Ringling Bros. and Barnum  
& Bailey Announces First-  
Ever Female Ringmaster,  
Kristen Michelle Wilson  
Joins *The Greatest Show  
on Earth* January 12, 2017  
in Orlando, Florida” press  
release, December 14, 2016.

Left, Fred Bradna, the first  
ringmaster for the Ringling  
Bros. and Barnum & Bailey  
Combined Shows

The Ringling Museum





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(Signed by) Martha Roth Wells,  
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# Archibald Campbell

## *The Circus Clown*

by John Daniel Draper

In January of 1951 our family moved to Bethany, West Virginia. I had taken a teaching position there in the Department of Chemistry at Bethany College. Little did I realize at that time that there was an interesting 19<sup>th</sup> Century circus connection associated with this small village of

less than a thousand inhabitants. Sometime later a copy of Gil Robinson's *Old Wagon Show Days*, published in 1925<sup>1</sup>, came to my attention.

In the book Robinson spoke of Archie Campbell, a famous clown on the Robinson Show, who was a relative of Alexander Campbell, the founder of Bethany College and a prominent ecumenical leader in the church. It was related that Archie Campbell, when he was about 24 years of age, left Bethany, Virginia with the circus after it had pitched its tents there in 1854.<sup>2</sup> Robinson then gave a fairly accurate account of Campbell's travels with the show. These continued until 1882 with the exception of the four years which Archie spent with the Union forces during the American Civil War.

Sometime was required in checking Campbell heritage records to determine Archie Campbell's actual relationship to Alexander Campbell (1788-1866). The task was not made any easier by the fact that there were numerous persons with the name of Archibald Campbell.<sup>3</sup> It has now been established that Alexander Campbell's father, Thomas Campbell, had a brother James (Alexander's uncle). James had a son, Archibald (Alexander's first cousin), who lived in a home in Bethany appropriately named Hibernia.<sup>4</sup> This person was identified as Hibernia Archie. He had a son, Archibald (Alexander's first cousin one generation removed) who was the circus clown, known to the family as Circus Archie.

Hibernia Archie (1791-1857) was born in Ireland and migrated to America in 1836. He settled in Bethany, Virginia with his family. Circus Archie, one of six children, (four daughters and two sons), was born in Ireland on November 16, 1830 and came to America at the age of six. It was reputed that this Archibald, the circus personage, attended the College of William and Mary and possibly graduated from there around 1853.<sup>5</sup>

There is substantial evidence in the form of newspaper advertisements, that Archie was a clown on John Robinson's Circus from 1856 through 1861 and again from 1866 until 1875.<sup>6</sup>

As a circus clown he was at various times a colleague of other pioneer clowns such as John Lowlow, William Lake, James Reynolds, Hiram Marks, A. Aymar, Nat Austin, William Reed, Sam Long, Sam Stickney, Lee Powell, and Pete Conklin. Campbell was also contemporary with some notable equestrian performers who appeared on John Robinson's Circus with him, namely James Robinson, William O'Dell, Mrs. Agnes Lake, Romeo Sebastian, John Wilson, Bob Stickney and Frank Robbins.



1. Sig Sebastian. 2. John Robinson, Wm. Ducrow, taken in 1860.  
3. (1. Johny Wilson; 2. Chas. McCarthy; 3. Jas. Campbell;  
4. Jos. Mazzoni; 5. Bob Filkins; 6. "Gil" Robinson; 7. Geo. M. Kelly.)  
4. Archie Campbell, John Robinson, Jim Homer.  
5. Hanlon Brothers: William, Thomas, Fred, 1861.

One page of illustrations in Gil Robinson's *Old Wagon Show Days* contains a rare image of Archie Campbell in the lower left corner.

The Ringling, Tibbals Collection



It must be remembered that the style of clowning then featured the talking role. There were many witty commentaries on current political issues, etc. much in the manner of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Will Rogers. Campbell was described as a "time honored dispenser of wit and humor, a rural humorist and a rural joker and farmer's almanac of fun."<sup>7</sup> He was a singing, talking, and acrobatic clown.

Charles Moore, an acquaintance of Archie, commented on his personality.<sup>8</sup> Speaking of Miss Ellen Campbell, he said: "She also had a brother named Archibald, who was a clown in a circus, and I afterward saw him and talked to him in Lexington, where he was in his clown's dress and make-up in his circus. I soon saw that the clown is not such a funny man, except in his special role. He seemed to me to be a sad man, and in thinking of him I have often thought that there was more of earnestness than is commonly supposed in what 'Mr. Merryman' says when he walks into the ring and sitting on the tub on which the elephant stands on his head, says with ennui, 'Go on with the show. I've seen it all.'"

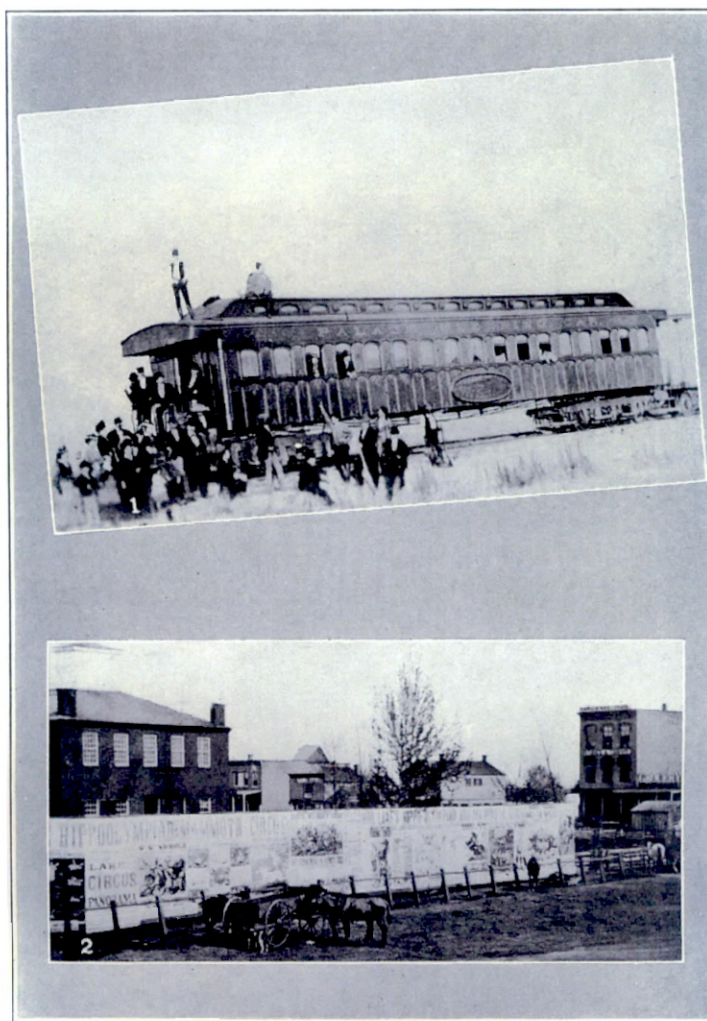
Preceding the Civil War, John Robinson's Circus spent a portion of each season traveling in the South. The earliest known mention of Campbell in show advertising can be found in the March 19, 1856 *Edgefield Advertiser* published in Edgefield, South Carolina. Included among the list of "Three Great Clowns for the Robinson and Elred Circus, Campbell shared billing with Sam Long and Alex Rockwell. Also part of the show was the elephant Bolivar, and a performance of ceiling walking performed by G. N. Elred."<sup>9</sup> An 1860 ad in the *Alexandria Gazette* similarly found Campbell as part of a triad of clowns on the Robinson and Lake show. The ad described him as "Archy Campbell, the Rural Joker and Farmer's Almanac of Fun."<sup>10</sup>

Serving as a private and a non-commissioned officer during the Civil War, Archie again visited many of these Southern villages and hamlets. According to Robinson, at Zollicoffer (presently Bluff City), a small community in Tennessee, Archie, then a sergeant with the Union army, helped to set up guns in an area where he remembered the circus ring to have been located a few short years before. Captured by the Confederates during the Stoneman cavalry raid in 1864, Archie was sent to Andersonville Prison.<sup>11</sup> Due to his friendly personality, he became a favorite with the Confederate officers and was finally exchanged. Almost immediately he returned to the circus ring as a clown.<sup>12</sup>

By March of 1866 Archie Campbell and John Robinson were among the performers advertised for season opening of Thayer & Noyes Circus in Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>13</sup> For

the next thirteen years, Campbell was routinely among the clowns listed in advertisements as performing on the John Robinson show. In 1876 Archie was made steward and manager of the cookhouse tent on John Robinson's Circus and Menagerie, a post he held until his death.<sup>14</sup> Following the 1879 season, there is no mention to be found of Campbell in advertising for the Robinson show. His name does not appear in the 1879 roster, but returns, listed as the show's Steward for the seasons of 1880, 1881, and 1882.<sup>15</sup>

When the show played Quincy, Illinois on September 4, 1878<sup>16</sup>, it gave half of its gross receipts to the yellow fever victims further south. It arrived from up-river by barge and, after setting up, presented the regular free street parade in the



1. The Robinson Circus was quarantined by Yellow Fever, at Vinita; for six weeks they lived in this sleeper—October, 1873.
2. One of the first billboards ever put up by a circus. Wm. Lake's Circus, Macomb, Ill., 1863.

Another page of illustrations from Robinson's book shows some of notable moments of the era of Campbell's clowning.

The Ringling, Tibbals Collection



The Ringling, Tibbals Collection



"The members of Old John Robinson's Circus, having met a great loss in the death of their old friend, Archy Campbell, have passed the following resolutions.

"Whereas, it have [sic] pleased kind Providence to remove from our midst Archy Campbell, whose many good qualities will ever be remembered by all, and whereas the deceased had been before the public for many years as clown, and the members of "Old" John Robinson's Circus, sensible of their great loss, have adopted the following resolutions.

"Resolved, That Archy Campbell will ever be remembered by all the members of the company as a true, just, genial and noble man.

"Resolved, That we will emulate his many virtues, treasure his kind and generous actions and cherish his memory.

"Resolved, That as members of "Old" John Robinson's Circus, we will wear the badge of mourning for thirty days.

"Resolved, That a copy of these resolutions be forwarded to the family of the deceased as an expression of our sincere sympathy in their deep affliction; also that a copy of these resolutions be sent to the *New York Clipper*, the *Mercury* and the *Cincinnati Inquirer* and the *Cincinnati Commercial*.<sup>19</sup>

Eight years later on August 8, 1890<sup>20</sup> John Robinson's Circus again played Redding. Great respect was shown to the fallen comrade who had been buried there. At the conclusion of the afternoon circus performance, the entire show proceeded to the burial grounds and while the band played a dirge, the grave was decorated with flowers.

Again quoting Gil Robinson: "Brave as a lion on the battlefield, true to his flag, tender and as constant as a woman in his friendships, as devoid of guile as the most innocent child, beloved by all, who can say that his life had been a mistake."<sup>21</sup> **Bw**

## Endnotes

1. Gil Robinson. *Old Wagon Show Days*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Brockwell Company, 1925.
2. This date cannot be substantiated by newspaper ads because of the destruction of the primary references by floods on the Ohio River at Wellsburg, West Virginia.
3. One of the more prominent of these was A. W. Campbell, city newspaper editor at Wheeling, West Virginia and one of the co-founders of the present *Wheeling News Intelligencer*. He was a nephew of Alexander Campbell and was a leading member among the ten delegates from West Virginia to the 1880 Republican nominating convention in Chicago that named James A. Garfield the Republican candidate for the presidency.
4. Hibernia is fully restored and is at present the residence of an official of Bethany College.
5. Due to incomplete records because of losses during the Civil War, it cannot be established with certainty that Archie Campbell ever attended the College of William & Mary during the 1850s.
6. Along with the rosters of performers found in the appendix of Gil Robinson's *Old Wagon Show Days*, a variety of specific circus ads have been found that prominently mention "Archy" Campbell as a featured clown on the Robinson Show:  
Advertisement, *Edgefield advertiser*, March 19, 1856. (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1856-03-19/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=01%2F01%2F1850&index=8&rows=20&searchType=advanced&language=&sequence=0&words=ARCHIE+CAMPBELL+CIRCUS&proxdistance=5&sort=relevance&date2=12%2F31%2F1891&ortext=&proxtext=&phrasertext=Archie+Campbell&andtext=circus&dateFilterType=range&page=4> accessed 9 Oct 2017)  
Advertisement, *Alexandria Gazette*, June 14, 1860. (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1860-06-14/ed-1/seq-4/#date1=01%2F01%2F1859&sort=date&date2=12%2F31%2F1861&words=CIRCUS+Circus+Lake+LAKE+lake+LAKES+ROBINSON+Robinson&language=&sequence=0&lccn=&index=13&state=&rows=20&ortext=&proxtext=&year=&phrasertext=&andtext=Robinson+Lake+Circus&proxValue=&dateFilterType=range&page=15> accessed October 27)  
Advertisement. *The Tarboro' Southerner*, September 19, 1867. (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026522/1867-09-19/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=01%2F01%2F1850&index=10&rows=20&searchType=advanced&language=&sequence=0&words=ARCHIE+CAMPBELL+Circus&proxdistance=5&date2=12%2F31%2F1891&ortext=&proxtext=&phrasertext=Archie+Campbell&andtext=circus&dateFilterType=range&page=1> accessed 9 Oct 2017)  
*New York Clipper*, December 5, 1868.  
*New York Clipper*, September 18, 1869.  
*New York Clipper*, April 8, 1871.
7. Advertisement, *The Sweetwater Forerunner*, September 24, 1868, (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn97065409/1868-09-24/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=01%2F01%2F1850&index=1&rows=20&searchType=advanced&language=&sequence=0&words=ARCHIE+CAMPBELL+Circus+CIRCUS&proxdistance=5&date2=12%2F31%2F1891&ortext=&proxtext=&phrasertext=Archie+Campbell&andtext=circus&dateFilterType=range&page=1> accessed 9 Oct 2017)
8. Charles C. Moore was writing in his book, *Behind the Bars*, Blue Grass Printing Co., Lexington, Kentucky, 1899. Born in 1838, he was a student at Bethany College from 1856 until 1858.
9. *Edgefield Advertiser*, March 19, 1856.
10. *Alexandria Gazette*, June 14, 1860.
11. *The Sedalia Weekly Bazoo*, August 22, 1882, page 5 (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90061066/1882-08-22/ed-1/seq-5/#date1=01%2F01%2F1850&index=0&rows=20&searchType=advanced&language=&sequence=0&words=Archie+Campbell+circu+Circus+circus&proxdistance=5&date2=12%2F31%2F1891&ortext=&proxtext=&phrasertext=Archie+Campbell&andtext=circus&dateFilterType=range&page=2> accessed 9 Oct 2017)
12. Robinson, 173-174.
13. *New York Clipper*, March 17, 1866
14. Robinson, 231.
15. *Ibid.*, 231.
16. *Quincy, Illinois Whig* of 1878.
17. *Bannerline*, August 15, 1953.
18. *N.Y. Clipper*, August 19, 1882, p. 350.
19. The published resolutions were sent to the Cincinnati papers because the Robinson winter quarters were at Terrace Park, a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio.
20. *New York Clipper*, August 30, 1890, p. 387.
21. Robinson, 174.



# ELLA-POLKA



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The cover of the sheet music for Strauss' Ella Polka

Houghton Library, Harvard University



# Music for Miss Ella

by Robert Kitchen

In 1852, circus man Spencer Q. Stokes went to England and joined a company that was formed by James Hernandez, Eaton Stone and Rufus Welch. With him he brought two young lady riders. One was Emma Sampson, who was a protégé of Stokes, and would ride under the name of Emma Stokes. Stokes would eventually marry this young lady and she would produce four daughters for him. The other apprentice rider was a young lady with remarkable skills who would take Europe by storm. She rode under the name of Miss Ella. No other lady rider could duplicate the tricks that Miss Ella could perform.<sup>1</sup> The show toured throughout England returning to the Drury Lane Theatre in 1853. At this point the show broke up, and Stokes took his company to the continent.

The show played all of the major cities of Europe and Miss Ella was an instant success. Princes Frederick and William of Prussia were so impressed with her that they invited Stokes to bring his company to Prussia. Berlin was played for 90 days under royal patronage and was most successful. From there the show moved to Vienna where it played the Karl Theatre. Ella made her Vienna debut on February 7, 1855 with a 3 month, 51 performance stand. It was there that Emperor Franz Joseph saw Ella and praised her performance. Patrons returned again and again to see the amazing Miss Ella perform. Among the many patrons was the famous composer Johann Strauss II, composer of the *Blue Danube Waltz*. Like many others, he was immediately enthralled with Miss Ella, and with his customary speed wrote the *Miss Ella Polka* just four days after seeing her debut performance. On February 11 he delighted his fans at a benefit concert in the Sofienbad-Saal with his *Miss Ella Polka*.<sup>2</sup> Strauss' publisher, Carl Haslinger, was aware of something that the composer did not know, that Miss Ella, in fact, was a man performing as a woman. What led Haslinger to this conclusion is unknown as Ella would not be exposed till much later. To avoid embarrassment to Strauss, Haslinger published the work with an amended title, the *Ella Polka*.<sup>3</sup> Stokes and his company left Vienna and moved on to the principle cities in Hungary, Poland and Italy.<sup>4</sup>

Miss Ella was a hit wherever she performed. She was showered with praise and gifts. One such story that Ella herself told, was one that involved a diamond ring that was



Johann Strauss

Houghton Library, Harvard University

given to her by the crown head of Germany. The ring fit rather loosely on her finger and while performing in St. Petersburg, Russia, the ring flew off of her finger into the tankard of the ring. After the performance she searched frantically for the valuable ring, but to no avail. At a later performance she noticed a glint in the tankard and after the show, returned to the spot to find the ring. While in Moscow it was said that a Russian Count fell deeply in love with Ella and offered Stokes a large sum if he would introduce Ella to him.

The fact that Ella was a man seemed to be known by only a few and the deception remained a secret for the remainder of the tour. While in Italy, King Victor Emmanuel saw the circus and became enthralled with Ella. He visited



# DRURY LANE.

Lessee.

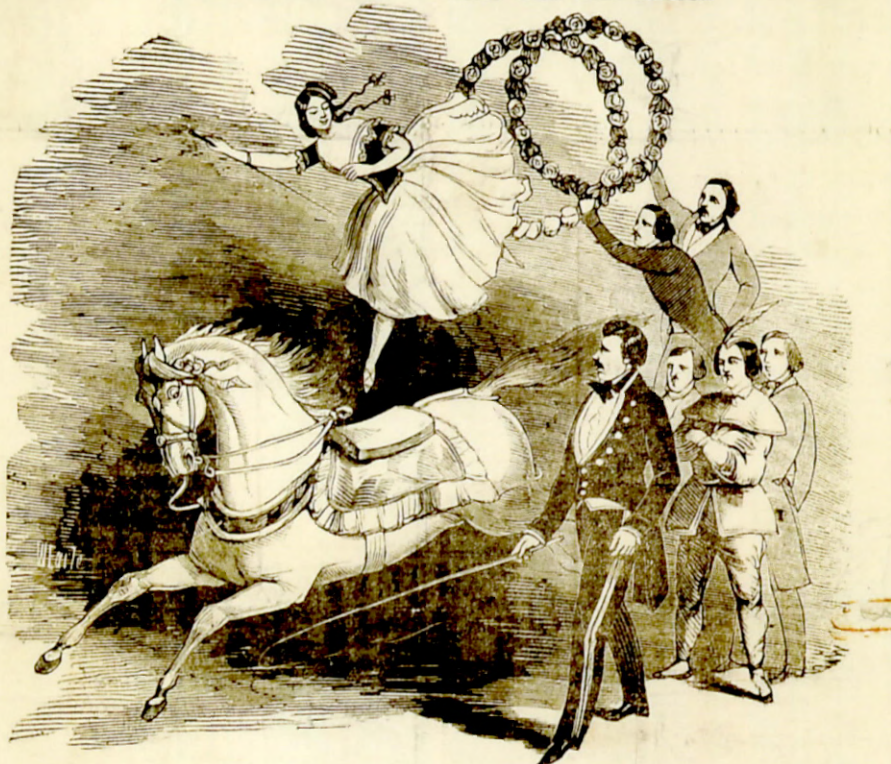
Mr. E. T. SMITH.

SATURDAY, June 20th, 1857.

## GRAND EQUESTRIAN PERFORMANCES

UNDER THE DIRECTION OF

### MISS ELLA.



Overture, - - - BY THE BAND.

1. Corde Elastique, Madlle. FLORA FABIA.

Clowns, EUGENE and FERDINAND.

2. Miss EMILY WELLS---Clown, SWANN.

3. Clown, EUGENE.

4. MANCHESTER BOY---Clown, SWANN.

5. Madame NEWSOME, Tandem Manege.

6. Madame SCHAPLIN---Clown, SWANN.

7. M. H. RUSSELLI and CHILDREN.

8. Hurdle Act, **Miss ELLA.**

AN INTERVAL OF TEN MINUTES.

9. Arab Leaps, by THE COMPANY.

10. Daughter of the Regiment, Madame SCHAPLIN.

11. M. H. RUSSELLI and SON.

12. File de Fer, HENDERSON.

13. Brunette, introduced by Madame NEWSOME.

14. **Miss ELLA's** Flight through 50 Balloons, and Aerial Vault to the Throne of Fame.

## THREE GRAND MORNING PERFORMANCES!

Monday, Wednesday, & Saturday, June 22, 24, & 27, at TWO.

PIT and PROMENADE - ONE SHILLING.

Galleries, 6d. Second Circle Boxes, 1s. 6d.

Dress Circle, - 2s. 6d. Private Boxes, - 10s. 6d. and £1 1s

Doors open at Half-Past Seven, commence at Eight.

R. S. FRANCIS, Printer. Catherine Street, Strand.

the circus many times and invited Ella to his residence. Ella did visit the King accompanied by a lady chaperone, who never left her side. Whenever Ella was invited to meet a dignitary, it was Stokes's policy that she be accompanied by a lady companion. The King presented Ella with a horse reported to be a magnificent black stallion, but a *New York Times* article in 1861 reported a court case where the horse was listed as a dapple gray, 6 years old, 15 hands high and used as a saddle horse. The King presented it "to the illustrious lady Zoyara as a tribute to her great equestrian skill and to her virtue as a lady".<sup>5</sup>

By 1857 Stokes and Ella were back in London. Ella rode with W. F. Wallett and an American and continental troupe at the Drury Lane Theatre. Stokes decided to take his rider back to the continent for a farewell tour. Ella's apprenticeship with Stokes ended during that tour in 1858. Ella was thought to be about 18 years old at that time. Supposedly, Stokes outfitted Ella with horses and all of the accouterments to continue the act. However Ella's gender deception was exposed while the show was in Germany. Many of those who fell in love with the lovely Ella were ready to take revenge and that might be at the point of a sword. Ella and company beat a hasty retreat back to London making one last appearance on Howe's and Cushing's United States Circus. It was at this time that Ella signed a contract with James Nixon, who was putting together a show to take back to the United States. This show would play Niblo's Garden in

*Miss Ella performed a hurdle act and a "Flight through 50 Balloons" at Drury Lane in June of 1857.*

The Ringling Museum



1859-1860. In the summer of 1860 P. T. Barnum would combine the Nixon Circus with Grizzly Adams' Bear Menagerie which he had recently acquired. The show played mainly in New England in the summer of 1860. Adams was the star of the show, but Zoyara was one of the featured acts.<sup>6</sup>

Who was the young man who could so aptly play the role of a young lady and go undetected for so long? Ella Zoyara was the creation of retired circus rider and showman Spencer Q. Stokes. Stokes gets credit for inventing the riding mechanic, a tool that would allow equestrians to develop new tricks without the danger of falling and getting hurt. In 1846 Stokes was with a new show run by Eaton Stone, Den Stone and Thomas McCollum called the Great Western Circus. The show played along the Mississippi River. It was supposedly during that tour that Stokes came upon a young lad of six or seven with a pretty face and long dark curly hair. The boy's name was Sam Omar Kingsley and he became apprentice to Stokes, a practice common at the time. He was also known as Sam, Little Sammy or Stokes' Sammy. The story is that Stokes noticed that a competing circus had a girl rider and was doing better business than his show with boy riders. Stokes had used boy riders dressed as girls in the past with some success. A boy rider could do turns that a girl could not do, but what if he had a girl rider who could perform the more difficult feats. Sam with his pretty face and luxurious hair was to become his experiment. Stokes dressed Sam in girls' clothing and surrounded him with female companions. The boy would eventually develop all of the mannerisms of the gentler sex yet have the strength of a young man. The deception was complete. By 1851 young Sam became established as a female rider performing tricks that no other female could duplicate.<sup>7</sup>

Kingsley rode primarily as Miss Ella while in Europe from 1852-1859. The Ella Zoyara name would be used throughout the rider's career in the United States. News traveled slowly from Europe to America and Zoyara was able to continue the ruse. Her first appearances in the States brought nearly the same audience reactions that she experienced in Europe. Patrons flocked to see her perform with the ladies throwing bouquets into the ring. It took little time for other shows to produce their own Zoyaras. When Dan Rice saw the response he began advertising his own Zoyara. His rat sheets would denounce the real Zoyara as a fake and his own as the real one. A third Zoyara would appear at Frank Rivers' Melodeon Music Hall. Both Rice and Rivers' Zoyaras were imitations. There was only one real Zoyara.

However, the deception in the States was fairly short lived. Zoyara was exposed and the press expressed outrage at the deception. Unlike the Europeans who were fooled and were ready to take drastic revenge, even at the point of a sword, their American counterparts simply melted into the night hoping no one would remember their foolishness.

Sam Omar Kingsley would eventually marry fellow rider Sallie Stickney, who performed under the stage name of Miss Heloise. A *New York Times* article in 1861 reported that "Miss Ella has since eloped with another Miss (we assume a genuine) to whom he was married a few days since."<sup>8</sup> This marriage would produce three children but would end in divorce. Sam would later marry a younger woman and have one child by her. As Kingsley's true gender became known he gave up the feminine garb and rode as a man resurrecting his Ella role only for special occasions, usually benefits for himself.

Kingsley took a circus to the Far East in the late 1870s and it seems he did ride, at least occasionally, as a woman. Kingsley would contract and die of smallpox while playing India. He was only 39 years old.

Why was Ella able to deceive people for so long? Did she really look feminine? Did her riding skills simply overwhelm her audiences? Richard Hemmings in a *New York Clipper* interview in 1908 said that he performed with Ella in 1852 in England and never had the slightest suspicion that the performer was not a girl. Hemmings reported that Ella had a faultless complexion of the brunette type. Her features were perfect and of the most womanly character as were her hands and feet. Her hair was of raven blackness, hung in luxuriant masses to her waist.<sup>9</sup> Ella was able to perpetuate her deception for a long time. It is truly one of the most fascinating stories in the history of the circus. **Bw**

## Endnotes

1. John Dingess unpublished manuscript, Hertzberg Circus Collection, The Witte Museum, San Antonio, Texas.
2. Kemp, Peter. Liner notes for Marco Polo recording, J. Strauss, Jr. Edition-Vol. 12.
3. *ibid.*
4. *Ella Polka*. You can listen to the Ella Polka at the following URL: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdcZ1xtWIL0>) (accessed October 6, 2017).
5. *New York Times*, November 30, 1861, "The King of Sardinia-Appearances are Sometimes Deceitful."
6. Kitchen, Robert, "Cooke's Royal Circus with Grizzly Adams' Bear Menagerie." *Bandwagon*, January-February 1989. Pg. 32-37.
7. Kitchen, Robert, "Will The Real Zoyara Please Stand Up", *Bandwagon*, May-June 1993. Pg.24-28. The author invites you to read the more complete version of Ella Zoyara's career in this edition of *Bandwagon*.
8. *Op. cit.* *New York Times*, November 30, 1861
9. *New York Clipper*, March 21, 1908, Chats With an Old Circus Man." Will S. Heck interview with Richard Hemmings.



# Future of Circus Business in Doubt

by Fletcher Smith

First Published in *The New York Clipper*,  
December 19, 1917

It was nearly 250 years ago that British equestrian Philip Astley first created the modern circus ring bringing together horses, clowns, tightrope walkers and musicians in what we now describe as the "modern circus." In the two-and-a-half centuries since, the circus has weathered wars, depressions, epidemics and the challenge of competing with new entertainment options such as motion pictures, radio and television.

Throughout the rich history of the American circus there have been times when the future looked cloudy. That was the case in 1938 when the Great Depression forced many long established shows to close forever. It was similar circumstances in 1956 when Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, the Clyde Beatty Circus and King Bros. all were forced to end their season early. Today we are at another crossroads as stalwart titles such as Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and Cole Bros. are no longer touring.

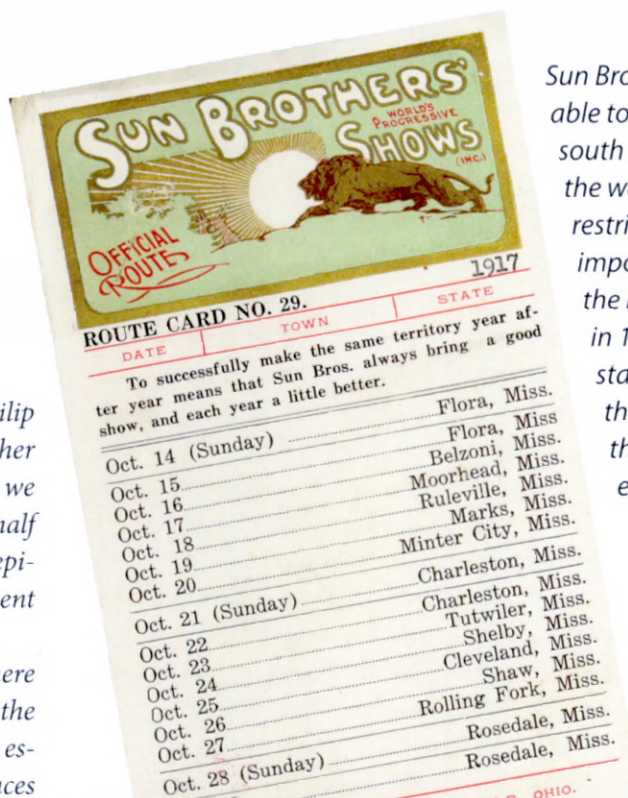
A century ago the future of the American circus also was in peril. As 1917 came to a close, show owners were uncertain of what was ahead. The United States entry into the World War in April had created tremendous problems for circuses that depended on railroads, which were now giving priority to trains that were shipping troops and materiel that was essential to factories and the Allies "Over There." The war also was taking a toll on manpower as performers and working men were being drafted or enlisting in the service.

Fletcher Smith, a correspondent for *The New York Clipper* outlined the concerns facing circuses as 1917 came to a close after a particularly difficult season.

C.B.

The season just passed has been an eventful one in circus history. It has been full of surprises, and more surprises are in store ere the blue birds take wing in the spring. What the future of the circus will be is problematical. Circus managers hope for the best, but the railroad situation is serious and it is a question whether circuses will not be classed by the Government as non-essentials and the railroads will refuse transportation.

Circus owners are doing nothing at present in fitting up



Sun Bros. was able to move south before the wartime restrictions imposed by the railroads in 1917 and stayed in Dixie throughout the fall and early winter.

Circus World Museum



Unable to route the circus into the South, Hagenbeck-Wallace closed early and returned to West Baden, Indiana. However, the season was proclaimed to be a financial success.

Circus World Museum





DATE	TOWN	STATE	R. R.	MILES
July 23	Mankato	Minnesota	C. & N. W. R.	94
" 24	New Elm	"	"	26
" 25	Spencer	Iowa	M. & A. S. L. R.	98
" 26	Fort Dodge	"	"	72
" 27	Carroll	Nebraska	C. & N. W. R.	108
" 28	Fremont	Nebraska	C. & N. W. R.	41
SUNDAY				
July 30	Omaha	"	C. & N. W. R.	82
" 31	Sorfolk	"	C. & N. W. R.	113
Aug. 1	Grand Island	Iowa	C. & N. W. R.	97
" 2	Hastings	"	C. & N. W. R.	122
" 3	Laboon	"	"	163
" 4	Clarinda	Iowa	C. & N. W. R.	97
SUNDAY				
Aug. 6	Ottumwa	"	C. & N. W. R.	92
" 7	Marshalltown	"	C. & N. W. R.	45
" 8	Mason City	"	C. & N. W. R.	74
" 9	Postville	"	"	97
" 10	Oelwein	"	"	64
" 11	Dubuque	"	"	116
SUNDAY				
Aug. 13	Rockford	"	"	94
" 14	Madison	"	"	88
" 15	Oskosh	"	"	92
" 16	Shiocton	"	"	45
" 17	Green Bay	"	"	64
" 18	Appleton	"	"	116

PERMANENT ADDRESS AND

Yankee Robinson had a banner season in 1917 under the management of Fred Buchanan. Greg Parkinson



No. 4 OFFICIAL ROUTE						
MAIL ADDRESS CARE BANK OF GRANGER						
GRANGER, IA. WILL BE PROMPTLY FORWARDED						
City	State	Month	Date	Railroad	Miles	
Kenosha	Wis.	May	7	C N W	95	
DeKalb	Ill.	May	8	C G W	80	
Stockton	Ill.	May	9	C G W	42	
Dubuque	Ia.	May	10	C G W	44	
Manchester	Ia.	May	11	C G W	57	
Waterloo	Ia.	May	12	C G W	106	
					C G W 47	
					C G W 33	
					C G W 65	
					CRIP 91	
					RICMSP 107	
					CMSP 94	
					1853	



GENERAL OFFICES, WEST BADEN, INDIANA				
DATE	CITY	STATE	R. R.	MILES
June 1	Ft. Wayne	Ind.	Wabash	108
June 2	Winchester	Ind.	G. R. & I.	67
SUNDAY				
June 4	Anderson	Ind.	Big Four	39
June 5	Marion	Ind.	Big Four	32
June 6	Kokomo	Ind.	Clover Leaf	27
June 7	Lafayette	Ind.	L. E. & W.	84
June 8	Champaign	Illinois	Wabash	84
June 9	Bloomington	Illinois	Big Four	47
SUNDAY				
June 11	St. Louis	Mo.	C. & A.	160
June 12	St. Louis	Mo.	"	"
June 13	St. Louis	Mo.	"	"
June 14	St. Louis	Mo.	"	"
June 15	St. Louis	Mo.	"	"
June 16	St. Louis	Mo.	"	"

Total Mileage to Date 2963

The Greatest Show on Earth played one-day stands across the Midwest and Plains states during the latter part of the summer of 1917.

Circus World Museum

Hagenbeck-Wallace staff could relax a bit from the rigors of trouping in mid-June during a six-day stand in St. Louis.

Greg Parkinson

for next season. All are waiting for the first of the year, when it is expected the railroad magnates will arrive at some decision. Circuses have felt the effects of the war this fall, as, for the first time in the history of circusdom, all of the roads running from Washington south refused to haul circus trains. Carnivals also suffered, lost time and dates, and, in many cases, were obliged to close.

The few circuses that were lucky enough to get south by way of Tennessee made some of the southern territory, and were stuck.

A big sufferer in this respect was Charles Sparks, of the Sparks show. One southern railroad refused absolutely to haul him north to his winter quarters in Salisbury, N. C., nor would it guarantee to move it north in the spring. Hence he went to Cincinnati for the winter. The Hagenback-Wallace and the Robinson show both closed early, as they could not secure movements in the south. Both, rather than take chances in the spring, wintered in the north, the former at West Baden and the latter at Peru, Ind.

The La Tena circus was the luckiest of all, as a fortunate contract with the Norfolk and Western road made it possible for them to get south as far as North Carolina and get back to winter quarters at Havre de Grace, Md., without any trouble. The Ringling and Barnum show, through the fact that the Ringlings are railroad owners, had an exception made in their case, and the shows made the stands contracted in the south.

The Sun Bros. show went down south early, moved over the smaller roads in Georgia, and is still moving down in Florida. It will not close till January 5, when they will ship to Macon, Ga., as usual.

It was a prosperous season for all shows, 50 percent better than last year, and only two shows closed, against five last year. The Cook Bros. show started out early and, with Frank J. Frink ahead, did good business in Pennsylvania. Against his wishes and judgment the show invaded the middle west, and starved to death. After a hard struggle and assistance from John F. Stowe, it was finally forced to close. The show went back to Trenton, N. J., and will go out in the spring on wagons.

The Coup and Lent show closed this season just a little later than it did the year before. It went out backed by non-showmen, of no experience; and with an expensive show and bad weather it could not keep moving, and gave up the ghost in Pennsylvania.

The real surprise of the season was the come-back of Andrew Downie and the La Tena show. Last year it closed suddenly and was shipped to winter quarters. Most show-



Cumberland, Wed., July 4

WAIT FOR US, WE ARE SURELY COMING!

**LATENA'S**  
**BIG 3 RING WILD ANIMAL**  
**CIRCUS**  
 THE SHOW THAT'S DIFFERENT

COL. LATENA

WAIT FOR A  
**REAL SHOW**  
 IT COSTS  
 NO MORE

PRESENTS MORE  
 WILD ANIMAL ACTS  
 THAN ALL OTHER  
 SHOWS  
 COMBINED

...Superbly Entertaining Program of Thrilling and Amazing Acts...  
 Past Graduates of Equestrianism, Animal Education, Acrobatic Gymnasts, Aerialists,  
 Contortionists, Trick Riders, Racing, Wonder Workers and Specialties.

**The Only Big Responsible Show Coming This Season**

**TWO TRAINS OF DOUBLE LENGTH CARS WILL BRING IT TO YOU.**

**GRAND FREE** Startling Sensational **FREE**  
**STREET PARADE** AT 10:30 EXHIBITION  
 A.M. Immediately Upon Return of Parade to the  
 Show Grounds.

2 Complete Performances Daily--2 ...Special Round Trip Excursions...  
 Afternoon and Night. • Doors Open at 1 and 7. ON ALL RAILROADS TO THE  
 Performances one hour later. BIG SHOW. 1917

Andrew Downie operated La Tena's Big 3 Ring Wild Animal Circus during World War I. This 1917 newspaper ad made substantial use of reverse printing resulting in white images set on black ink backgrounds.

Circus World Museum

At right, Sells-Floto baggage stock assembled near the runs as preparations were made to unload the cookhouse wagons and haul them to the circus lot. This was a scene repeated day after day throughout the 1917 season.

Circus World Museum

men thought that was the end of it. But Downie never knows when he is whipped. He got busy, secured backing, and the show, with Bert Rutherford picking out the good spots, opened up as usual and from the start did a wonderful business. Every dollar Downie owed was paid before the last of June, and, barring a few weeks of bad business in Ohio, the show did not have a losing week. Business on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, usually a death trail, was immense, the top being packed twice daily. He had the Carolinas and Virginia to himself, and literally mopped up. Nobody grudges him his good luck.

The Sparks show had a big season, and cleaned up in the east, as they had New England practically to themselves. They played them as they came, big and little. Worcester, Mass., was the only big city in which they fell down. The Sun Bros. show beat them to Long Island, but they did good business a week behind them. The fall business in the south was big, and the show pulled into winter quarters at Carthage, Ohio, with a big winner.

The success of Jess Williard with the Buffalo Bill show was a surprise to showmen. After the retirement of Edward Arlington, who, however, continued to route and railroad contract, it made enough for Willard to get back his purchase price.

The Hagenback-Wallace show had bad luck for a time, owing to bad weather, and lost four stands in one week, commencing at Erie, Pa. The season was big for them, however, and with Charles Gollmar at the helm, next season great things are expected of it another year.

James Patterson is a bang up carnival man, but it takes a circus man to run a circus successfully. He bought the Gollmar show, and put it out over its old territory, making money in spots and having some bad territory. He closed early, and the show is now for sale.

Right, The Cole Bros. Circus midway in 1917. Note the electric lights placed above each pair of side show banners.

Circus World Museum



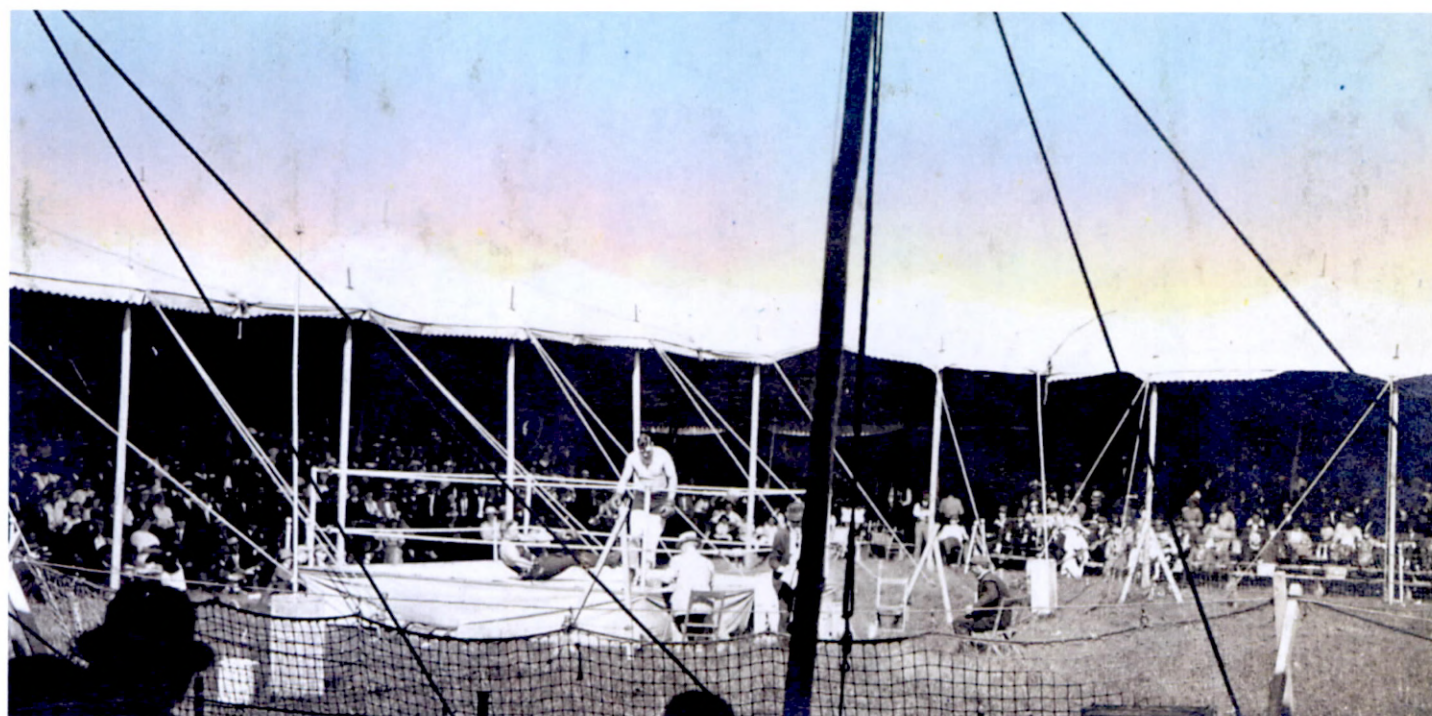






Above, most shows continued to feature horse-drawn circus street parades in 1917. Right, Sells-Floto had a highly successful season, reportedly making the greatest profit in the show's history.

Circus World Museum



Legendary heavy-weight boxing champion, Jess Willard, can be seen in the ring of his Buffalo Bill-Jess Willard Show during 1917, having just knocked down an opponent. This was the only year his enterprise operated.

Circus World Museum





*Ringling Bros. boasted an impressive menagerie in 1917.*

Circus World Museum

If no one buys it before spring he may send it out again.

Fred Buchanan makes money every season with the Yankee Robinson show; and this was his banner season. He digs up new territory, is not afraid to railroad his show, and doesn't tarry long in bad spots. He is a busy man just now, trying to convince the powers that be that circuses should be hauled as usual next spring.

Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers did not meet with the expected success with the John Robinson title, and it is reported that the show will be reduced in size for next season. Rumor also has it that each man will take out a show of his own in the spring.

The old-timer Gentry show, as usual, drew the children and the parents in droves, and Messrs. Newton and Austin cleaned up. Their business in the big cities was immense.

Henry B. Gentry surprised his friends with his management of the Sells-Floto show, and it was a big winner on the season. In fact, the show this season made more money than it ever did before. The same is true of Al. G. Barnes, with his wild animal show.

The paradeless Sun Bros.' show this season followed Harry Mann's advice and kept out of Michigan, dug up new territory, and it is the biggest season for them in the history of the show. It put in two weeks on Long Island, and actually turned people away. It also did well in Pennsylvania. Again this year it has Florida all to itself. Contrary to rumors, the show will go out again next season.

Thompkins' Wild West, on wagons, had

a good season, and although the show was advertised for sale, it is stated on good authority that it will go out as usual in the spring. Al. F. Wheeler was in big luck going back to wagons and getting down into North Carolina to get the cream. He could play them all, as the railroads shut out all the others except Downie, and he did not touch the eastern section of the state.

J. Augustus Jones always makes money, and

his season was no exception. Both the Call Bros. and the Cooper Bros. show closed with a big balance to the good. If Jones can get his price, he will sell out, but it is a safe bet that he will be on the road as usual in the spring. He is breaking into the publishing game as a big stockholder in an outdoor publication, and if he sees anything in it, it must be a good proposition.

Carnivals all did business, and there was nothing at all the matter with the outdoor show business the past season, but the railroad bugaboo, and it is to be hoped this will be straightened out before spring. If not, most shows will be Spellmanized, and either use motor trucks or horses. It's a sure thing the circus managers are not going to lay down without a fight, and this country will not do without the white tops next summer. **Bw**



*Imagine the impact of this bold 1917 lithograph promoting railroad excursions to the circus.*

Circus World Museum





RINGLING  
BROS. AND

THE  
GREATEST  
SHOW  
ON  
EARTH®

BARNUM  
& BAILEY®

PRESENTS

OUT OF THIS  
WORLD™

COLLECTIBLE  
FINAL  
FAREWELL  
1871-2017  
EDITION





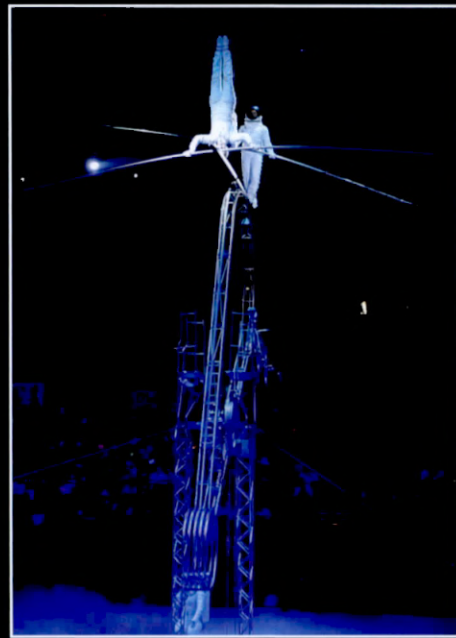
*Tatiana Tchalabaeva*

Dan Kleintop



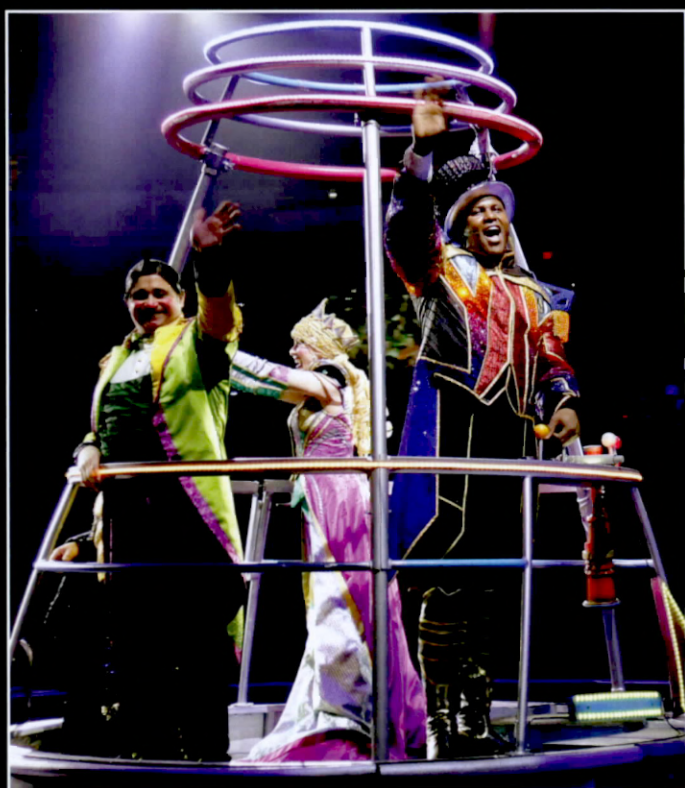
*Paulo dos Santos*

Fred Serex



*The Simet Troupe*

Fred Serex



*Left, Out of This World program cover*

The Ringling

*Above, Davis Vassallo, Tatiana Tchalabaeva, and Johnathan Lee Iverson*

Dan Kleintop



*Right top, The Ringling Blue Unit Clowns*

Fred Serex

*Right bottom Alexander Lacey and Masai*

Paul Gutheil







Out of This World advertising banner

Author's collection

# Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey *Out of This World* (Blue Unit)

by Chris Berry

From its earliest roots the circus in America evolved with the country, shaping the experience for audiences as their expectations changed.

Circus lore would have us believe that in about 1825 J. Purdy Brown was denied a license to hold a circus performance at a building in Wilmington, Delaware, so he devised a tent that could be used in place of a permanent wooden structure. In the 1870s circuses moved from wagons to rails and audiences increased exponentially. A second ring was added, and then, a decade later, a third.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century John Ringling North added mechanization to the show, along with Hollywood style choreography, and such unique features as a fearsome gorilla, a five year old who played the xylophone, and a singing ringmaster. When it became impossible for *The Greatest Show on Earth* to continue under canvas, the expertise that Irvin and Israel Feld had producing large venue concerts gave them a powerful role in transitioning the circus to arenas.

In the 1980s Cirque du Soleil framed a narrative around astounding circus acts, changing the way that audiences thought of the entertainment. For the new millennium, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey continued evolving its

presentation incorporating new technologies in lighting, special effects, and dynamic specialty acts.

On July 14, 2016 a new production of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey premiered at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. In addition to being the first new circus to be staged since the show retired its elephants on May 1<sup>st</sup> of that year, *Out of This World* promised a fresh concept for Ringling. The new Blue Unit show would incorporate a storyline, along with digital mapping technologies as well as an ice floor, a performance surface new to the circus. Despite all of these innovations, *Out of This World* was destined to be the final production of this icon of American entertainment.

Just prior to the Los Angeles opening, Alana Feld, Executive Vice President and Producer of the new show, described it as being unlike any other. "We are taking audiences to outer space, and the technology and devices we are using to do that are really innovative and are going to be really compelling to audiences, and really deepen that relationship the audiences have with the show and the performers."<sup>1</sup>

While theme-based circuses had been produced by



Feld for a number of years, *Out of This World* followed a storyline presented in outer space, placing characters played by acrobats, clowns and other performers in an arena staged with a black backdrop along with high-resolution LED projections and 3D images of planets and stars. The show also featured two large video screens which provided recorded content intended to carry the audience from scene to scene.

*Out of This World* played dates throughout California and cities such as Denver and Chicago in the summer and fall of 2016, but in late October word came that December performances that had been booked in St. Louis and Oklahoma City had been cancelled due to “necessary modifications to the tour schedule.” Tickets that had been purchased for those two cities were refunded.<sup>2</sup>

After a December holiday break, the new circus began a tour that was scheduled to start in Miami, Florida January 6, 2017 and close out the year on December 31, 2017 in Tampa. Included on the original itinerary were stops in Las Vegas, Phoenix, Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Boston, Pittsburgh and Detroit.<sup>3</sup> None of those cities would see *The Greatest Show on Earth* in 2017, as just nine days into the new year of performances, on January 14, an announcement was made that stunned the cast and crew of the show, along with circus fans and those who follow entertainment and popular culture around the world. The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus would close forever on May 21, 2017 at the Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale, New York.

There are many stories associated with the final days and performances of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. What follows are some of the highlights of the 146 day tour of *Out of This World* during the Season of 2017.



*The Blue Unit traveled on 56 cars in 2017.*

Hal Guyon

**Jan. 6-15 – Miami, Florida**  
**(American Airlines Arena) 260 Miles from Tampa**  
**Quarters – Railroads: CSX, Florida East Coast**  
**Tickets \$18-84**

After the holiday break, the 56 cars of the Blue Unit train began the 260 mile trek from the CSX rail yard in Tampa to Miami. During the first week of January performers and crew started arriving, with the promise of a new year on the horizon.

Although some traditionalists were bemoaning the fact that ice show performers had been added to the program, those with the circus were enthusiastic about the new season. Lorelei Owens, in her third year with the show was excited about the staging. “We have kind of an unlimited canvas to play with, and we were really able to explore different ideas and still have it fit the story.”<sup>4</sup>

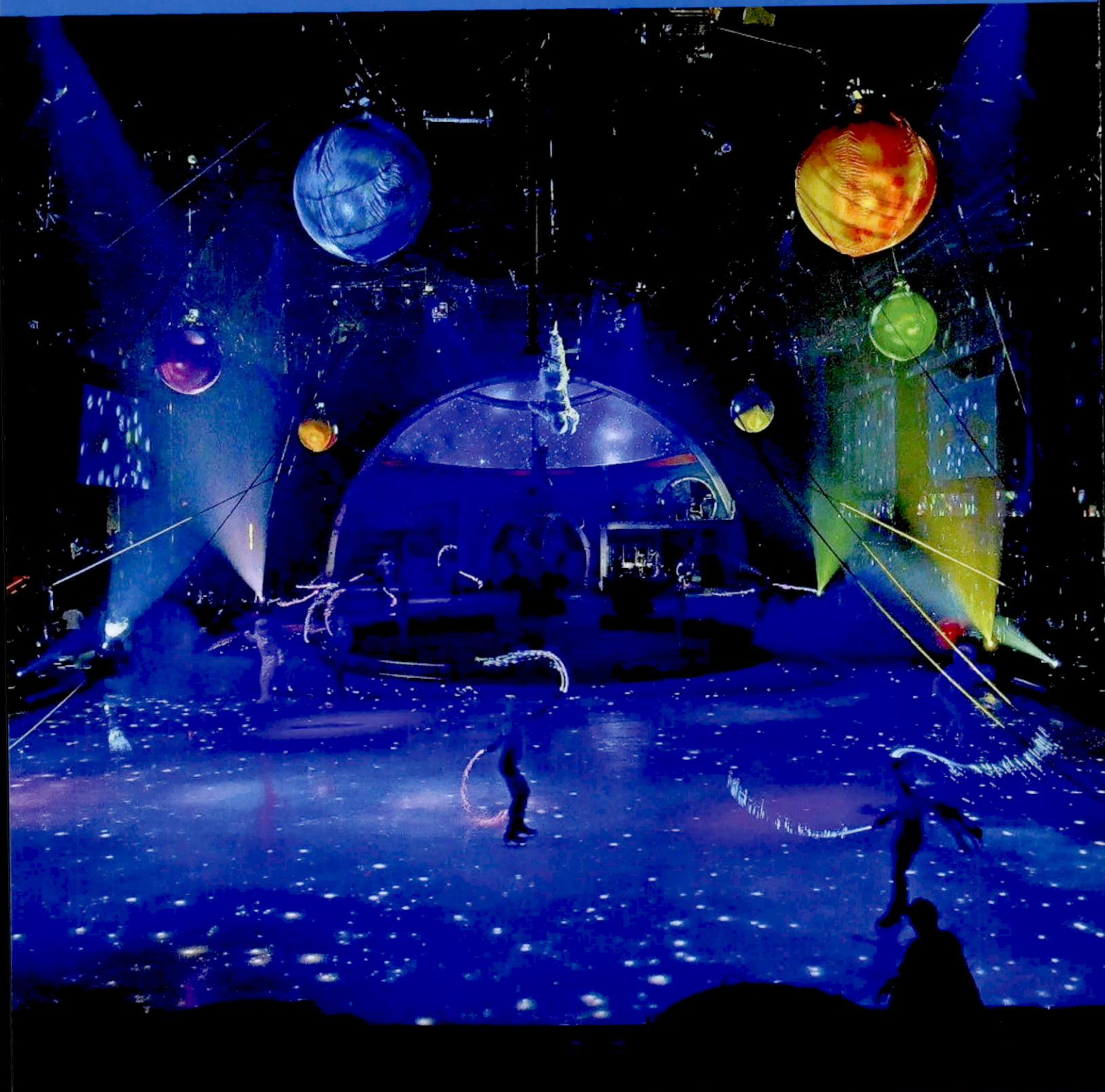
As producer of the show Alana Feld addressed differences between the circus and the Feld ice shows. “We wanted to think of the ice in a different way than what we’ve done on *Disney on Ice*,” adding “because this is a circus and because Ringling Bros. is all about showing the amazing and bringing thrills, we wanted the skating to feel more thrilling. We actually call it ‘thrill-skating.’ You get more stunts out of the skating – it’s a little less lyrical and graceful. It’s still beautiful, but it’s a lot more stunt and freestyle-type skating, which adds a more contemporary nature.”<sup>5</sup>

But despite the changes in staging and interviews that were appearing in the press in early January, the decision to close the circus had already been made. On Saturday January 14 a notice was posted that a mandatory meeting for all staff would be held at 10:00 p.m. after the third performance of the day.<sup>6</sup> According to many cast members on both shows, rumors had been swirling for months about downsizing to one unit or even a possible sale to Disney.

“Backyard gossip” has long been a part of the close-knit circus world, but in the hours after the staff meeting was announced the rumors were running at full-speed, fueled by texting and social media. Text exchanges between the two units such as “A meeting is scheduled at the same time in Orlando,” were met with responses such as “Kenneth is in the building.”

For hours the crew and cast speculated on the nature of the meeting with both shows giving two more performances that Saturday. Still few suspected the bombshell announcement when Kenneth Feld entered a meeting room at the American Airlines Center at 10:12 p.m., the exact time that daughter Juliette Feld met with the Red Unit staff





*The scenic elements helped turn arenas into an outer space spectacle for the performance.*

Tatiana Tchalabaeva



in Orlando's Amway Center. Both father and daughter delivered essentially the same message. The circus would not finish the season. The Red Unit, *Circus Xtreme*, would close May 7 in Providence, Rhode Island and the Blue Unit, *Out of This World* would close two weeks later – on May 21 – in Uniondale, New York.

A news release was flashed around the world within minutes, reposted by hundreds of Facebook users and relayed by text messages and Twitter. The official announcement blamed the decision on high costs, coupled with a decline in ticket sales. According to the news release, those two factors made “the circus an unsustainable business for the company.” Both Kenneth and Juliette Feld were quoted in the release.

“Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was the original property on which we built Feld Entertainment into a global producer of live entertainment over the past 50 years,” said Kenneth Feld, Chairman and CEO of Feld Entertainment. “We are grateful to the hundreds of millions of fans who have experienced Ringling Bros. over the years. Between now and May, we will give them one last chance to experience the joy and wonder of Ringling Bros.

“This was a difficult business decision to make, but by ending the circus tours, we will be able to concentrate on the other lines of business within the Feld Entertainment portfolio,” said Juliette Feld, Feld Entertainment’s Chief Operating Officer. “Now that we have made this decision as a company, and as a family, we will strive to support our circus performers and crew in making this transition to new opportunities,” she added.<sup>7</sup>

As soon as Kenneth Feld made the announcement in Miami, he left the conference room. The seats had been arranged so the staff was facing the door, and the podium positioned so that Feld wouldn’t have to work his way through the scores of performers and crew members who had gathered for the meeting. Other managers started talking to the assembled employees, but many of those in the room were in shock. “We heard the news but we didn’t hear the news,” said veteran performer Tatiana Tchalabaeva. “Our ears heard, but our hearts and brains didn’t.”<sup>8</sup>

Ringmaster Johnathan Lee Iverson said the hand writing was on the wall. “I knew it was coming to a close, and anyone who didn’t wasn’t paying attention. Promoters were frustrated on how to sell the show, and in my opinion, there wasn’t the interest there to maintain it,” he said, add-

ing “Ringling Bros. is a weird paradox. The best and worst things happened when it became a big corporation. It had great funds to put on magnificent shows, pay people well and defend itself against animal activists. On the flip side, corporate mentality isn’t a creative mentality. It is a dollars and cents mentality and when you are creating shows based on focus groups the creative spark is lost.”<sup>9</sup>

Peggy Williams, a 48-year veteran both as a performer and a manager, saw things a bit differently. She said she was stunned, learning about it in a text from her brother who had seen the announcement on CNN. “In retrospect, if you start putting some of the puzzle pieces together you might suspect something was in the wind, but the production managers were as surprised as anyone.”<sup>10</sup>

Over the next several hours circus fans and speculators began buying tickets for the final performances in May, and while some rushed to the American Airlines Arena box office the next day, according to the Miami Herald, “the 11 a.m. show in Miami attracted a decent crowd, but it was hard to ignore the black curtain that obscured the empty upper deck. Blocs of empty seats blotted a few lower bowl sections.”<sup>11</sup>



*Wages Argott and the final Ringling-Barnum Band*

Paul Gutheil

**Jan. 19-21 – Birmingham, Alabama**  
**(Legacy Arena) 820 Miles – Railroads: Florida East Coast, CSX – Tickets \$11-26**

Birmingham is the hometown of Wages Argott who had been leading the Blue Show band for the past 11 years. Although he moved away years ago, playing the same town where he saw the show growing up allowed him to reconnect with family and former classmates, and it seemed like



all of them were asking him about next steps for him and his wife Kelli Karsten, a former clown with the show.

In an interview following his last trip to his hometown Argott reflected on what the closing of the show meant to him. "I'm just sad to see this go away," he said. "My wife and I will be fine, and there is some excitement about determining where we're going to live. I mean, we've been shopping every major city in America for the past six or seven years, so it'll be fun to pick one and settle down. But it's definitely sad. I had this outstanding band full of great friends that I was leading, I was part of this huge show, my wife was out traveling with me – it doesn't get any better than this. This was truly my dream job."<sup>12</sup>

The educational outreach department from the circus marketing department did a great job here with a major promotion that started December 14 and continued



*Jerry Lee jacking the runs in Columbia, South Carolina.*

Hal Guyon



*One of the show's wagons loaded on the train*

Hal Guyon

through the circus run, promoting reading in exchange for circus tickets. Children from the age of 2 to 12 could register at 19 Birmingham Public Library branches, and earn virtual badges and other awards including circus tickets.

Meanwhile, the fact that the circus would be ending within a matter of months was sinking in for many on the show who had received a severance packet which included a short letter explaining what was happening, along with information on assistance with job training, outplacement and other benefits that would be available once the circus closed.

**Jan. 26-29 – Columbia, South Carolina**  
**(Colonial Life Arena) 440 Miles – Railroad: Norfolk Southern – Tickets \$13-53**

Because of the now historic nature of the tour, local news media in every city was chasing the story, providing a different type of feature than in previous seasons. Many of the news stories focused on the "people" of the circus and their future, including a column in Columbia's *State* newspaper by Salley McInerney who made a trip to the rail yards to see the train, and in doing so made some new friends, including Lauren Solomon, who along with Sheilah Tarbell and David Schwarz taught 32 children from kindergarten to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. "It's an honor to have been a part of American history," she told the reporter, "and this is American History."<sup>13</sup>

A footnote to circus history in Columbia. Even after leaving the city and coming off the road forever, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey left something behind on the University of South Carolina campus – the Elephant Room at Carolina Coliseum.

For generations students from area high schools have gathered in the arena's "Elephant Room" before graduation ceremonies, and for years before that, USC students stood in long lines to register for classes in the catacomb-like basement that also serves as a loading area.

Most suspected the "Elephant Room" name had some connection to the circus elephants, but here is the official story of how it got its name, as passed down from former coliseum directors to current director Sid Kenyon.

"In one of the early years of the Carolina Coliseum (somewhere around 1970), the outside temperatures were near the high teens while Ringling Bros. circus was here. It was determined that the temperatures were too cold for the elephants to remain in their tents in the parking lots behind the building, so



they were brought into the storage (and) staging area adjacent to the arena portion of the coliseum. People began calling this area the 'Elephant Room.'"<sup>14</sup>

**Feb. 1-5 – Charlotte, North Carolina  
(Spectrum Center) 115 Miles – Railroad: Norfolk  
Southern – Tickets \$20 and up**

Crowds were now turning out in record numbers, with almost every show a sell-out. As Irvin Feld and his marketing chief Allen Bloom used to say "the circus is entertainment for the masses, and not for the classes."<sup>15</sup>

The credo was picked up and reported by *Charlotte Observer* columnist Theoden Janes as he closed his February 1, 2017 column titled "This is why you should see Ringling Bros. circus, one last time:"

"I noticed as I waited in line to get in, as I settled into my seat, and again as I headed to the exits after the lights came up at the end: Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey is a remarkably unifying spectacle.

"Yes, on Wednesday night at uptown's Spectrum Center, I saw something that I don't see nearly as often as I'd like to in Charlotte: a rich mix of races, colors, religions, creeds, sexes, sexual orientations and ages – all being entertained under one roof at the same time.

"In what's become a shockingly divisive time in our country's history, losing a piece of popular culture that promotes so much wonder and awe among such a diverse crowd is a loss for America indeed."<sup>16</sup>

The Charlotte stand offered the unusual opportunity for performers from both circuses to get together during the season. A number of Blue Unit performers along with some of those behind the scenes made the 100 mile drive to Greenville, South Carolina where the Red Unit's *Circus Xtreme* was showing. The trip allowed those from both shows to socialize and pose for a group photo on the floor of Greenville's Bon Secours Wellness Arena.

**Feb. 9-12 – Raleigh, North Carolina  
(PNC Arena) 174 Miles. – Railroads: CSX, Norfolk  
Southern – Tickets \$15-200**

With tickets at a premium, local news media was now asking questions about the performance at the box office as much as on the arena floor. In an interview with the *New*

*York Post*, Ringmaster Johnathan Lee Iverson compared the success of the circus with one of Broadway's hottest properties, "We're suddenly the new *Hamilton* and it's very exciting!"<sup>17</sup>

A spokesman for Feld Entertainment reinforced that sentiment, although he wouldn't disclose how many tickets were being sold. Stephen Payne told the *Raleigh News-Observer* that since the January announcement of the final shows, "there's been an outpouring of fans" who want to see the circus one last time. We're always grateful for the support and fans in Raleigh, and the PNC Arena is a great venue." Payne added, "The performers are energized when they see a packed house, and everyone's looking forward to these performances."<sup>18</sup>

As for the fans themselves, during the matinee performance on February 10<sup>th</sup>, tweets from the sellout audience of nearly 19,000 flashed across a large screen. Some of those praised the circus for putting on an exciting show, while others mourned its closing.

"The circus is better than work or school any day!" one Twitter user wrote, as someone else posted, "Thank you for the wonderful year of memories."

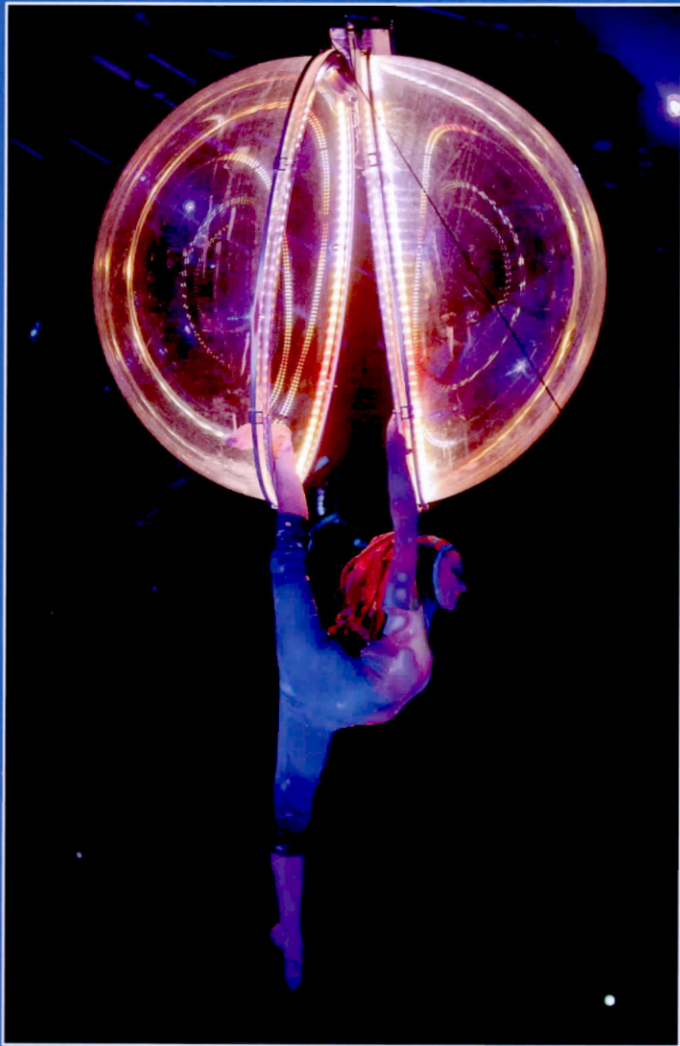
One Raleigh resident, Diana Swearengin, talked about attending her first Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey performance in 1946 when she was three years old. Now at 74 she is heartbroken. As she wiped away tears she told a reporter, "It is hard saying goodbye."<sup>19</sup>

**Feb. 16-20 – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
(Wells Fargo Center) 441 Miles. – Railroad: CSX  
Tickets \$15-118**

2017 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> year the big show was booked into the Wells-Fargo Center, but the neighborhood in South Philadelphia has long been a destination for circus fans in the City of Brotherly Love. Since 1997 the circus had been showing in what then was named the First Union Center, and for 30 seasons before that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey made its annual home at the Spectrum, located just across the parking lot until it was demolished in 2010. This area, now known as the South Philadelphia Sports Complex on Broad Street was also the site where Cecil B. DeMille captured the setup of the big top during filming of his Academy Award-winning film *The Greatest Show on Earth* in 1951.

The 2017 Philadelphia stand also garnered press from a circus promotion that was 24 years in the making. In 1993 as part of its celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the cir-





*Top left, aerial performer during the opening of the performance.*

Fred Serex

*Top right, ice skaters incorporate aerial feats into their performance.*

Fred Serex

*Left, Performers style after the show's opening production.*

Fred Serex



cus in America, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey offered every American born in 1993 a free ticket that could be used at any time during his or her life.

According to news reports from 1993, "Baby's First Circus" was Kenneth Feld's way of making sure a new generation of children would enjoy the 200 year old circus tradition which began in 1793 in Philadelphia. At the time Feld said, "It is my deeply held belief that every child should experience Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. And we can think of no better way of celebrating two centuries of America's traditional family entertainment favorite than to share it with America's future citizens."<sup>20</sup>

Twenty-four years later the chickens came home to roost in Philadelphia as Jeanna Padilioni cashed in the ticket that her mother was given when Jeanna was born in 1993. For two decades her mother had held the pass, finally using it on February 19, 2017 with the knowledge that it would be null and void after the circus closed May 21. Nearly a quarter of a century after her mother was given the ticket, Jeanna went to the circus for free, and just as those long-ago promoters had gambled, she took her entire family and they paid for their tickets!<sup>21</sup>

#### **Feb. 23-Mar. 3 – Brooklyn, New York (Barclay Center) 78 Miles – Railroads: CSX, Long Island Railroad – Tickets \$15 and up**

The last time Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey played New York's Madison Square Garden was April 4, 2010 when *FUNdrum!* finished its run just prior to renovation of the Midtown arena. The big show never returned to Manhattan, and since 2013 Brooklyn's Barclay Center has been the New York City home for *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

For nine days and 15 performances the cast of *Out of This World* delivered their curtain call at a state-of-the-art arena located less than a mile from where it all started, as it was on April 10, 1871 that P. T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Hippodrome gave its first performances ever near the corner of Fulton Avenue and Hoyt Street in downtown Brooklyn, just a short walk from today's Barclay Center.

Coincidentally, the first performance in 1871 and the last in 2017 brought *The Greatest Show on Earth* to the borough for nine days. Barnum's first tent in 1871 was set up for six days at Fulton and Hoyt, followed by one-day of performances in Greenpoint, and a two day stand in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood.<sup>22</sup>

That first season of 1871 Barnum's circus traveled by wagon, so it would be difficult for him to imagine today's congestion that at times paralyzes many of the rail yards in the Northeast Corridor. For years the Ringling trains were spotted at the Sunnyside yards in Queens, however the only place in New York where the circus train could now remain for days on end was in Uniondale, just a short distance from where the train would be spotted at the end of the 2017 tour. Because of the distance from the train to the Barclay Center, charter buses were used again this season to transport the cast and crew the 28 miles from the train to the arena, a 90-minute trek during times of heavy traffic.<sup>23</sup>

As with so many performances over the past several seasons, the Brooklyn crowds making their way into the Barclay Center on Atlantic Avenue had to jostle past protesters – some dressed as tigers and elephants – with signs that read "I wasn't born to perform – "Freedom matters" and "Send the animals to sanctuaries."<sup>24</sup>

Reporter Jason Zinoman of the *New York Times* understood the importance of the circus in popular culture when he wrote his review of the show after seeing the opening performance, excerpted here:

"Long before television and radio invaded homes, the circus was the national entertainment industry, complete with vast marketing campaigns and global talent scouts. Imagine the response to seeing Disney or McDonald's go out of business, and you get a sense of what someone from a century ago would think about Ringling Brothers' closing shop.

"The company has faded over the decades, its grandeur eclipsed and its animal acts seeming fusty, but make no mistake: Something irreplaceable will be lost when Ringling closes up its tent for good – a tradition of inspiring awe that connected parent to child, generation to generation.

"*Out of This World*, the current show by Ringling (led by its creative director, Amy Tinkham), is a reminder that nothing on a screen can replicate the wonder and urgency of the live circus. Keeping up with the times, this uneven production has some video and some projections, backing up some nonsense story about an evil intergalactic queen, a magic telescope and a journey through space, but these forgettable elements are secondary, mere interruptions to the real matter at hand: the acts.



"What really distinguishes Ringling Brothers are the animal acts. They have long been the bread and butter of this circus – one of its most classic posters promises "the world's most terrifying living creature." And in this show, they were out in force: llamas, hopping dogs, a donkey, lions and tigers, a kangaroo and a lumbering pig.

"This menagerie has inspired furious protests, including activists outside this show holding photos of tigers that read: 'Whipped for your entertainment.' For those who want their circuses cage-free, Cirque du Soleil shows that you can offer crowd-pleasing spectacle without lions and tigers and pigs.

"When I took my young daughter to see Ringling a few years ago, just as my parents had done with me, it was the elephant that captivated her the most. On the way out, I bought a doll of one for her, with the red sign promoting *Greatest Show on Earth* over its trunk. That stuffed toy sat near her bed for years, long after she had lost interest in dolls. When I threw it out to make room for less childish things, I didn't expect how furious she would get with me. She says she still misses it."<sup>25</sup>

Among those on hand for the sold out matinee on February 25, was Zachary Cloutier who celebrated his ninth birthday by attending the show with his parents. While leaving the Barclay Center, he was asked by his father what he thought of the circus. His response echoed that of many budding circus fans. "It was the most fun day of my life!"<sup>26</sup>

**Mar. 8-12 – Newark, New Jersey**  
**(Prudential Center) 47 Miles – Railroads: Long Island Railroad, CSX – Tickets \$15-300**

After the final Brooklyn performance March 3, the props, animals, cast and crew made the jump from the rail yards in Uniondale, Long Island to Newark, New Jersey. The train would be returning to Uniondale in just over two months for the final performances in mid-May.

On Thursday March 9, a special performance was held at the Prudential Center for about 200 school children. Among those on hand to bid farewell to the show was Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, who was very impressed with the King Charles unicycle troupe, and their ability to jump rope while balancing on one wheel. After seeing them perform the mayor quipped, "I can't even jump without a bike."<sup>27</sup>



*Tatiana Tchalabaeva as the Intergalactic Space Queen*

Fred Serex

As kids were attending special performances such as the one given at the Prudential Center, the clock continued counting down. The cast and crew were quickly coming to the realization that time was running short with only seven more cities left on the itinerary. Although she hadn't been on the road since visiting the Red Unit in January, longtime manager Peggy Williams said by this time on tour she was playing "mother superior" to many of the younger members of the company. "I told them, you don't own your job unless you own the company. You trade your talent and time for money and that is what working is about." She added, "there was a lot of consoling, but circus people are the most resilient people in the world."<sup>28</sup>

Among those demonstrating that resilience was Tatiana Tchalabaeva, who first joined the show in 1991 and was one of the featured performers in *Out of This World*. For Tatiana the final months were, in her words, "an ocean of emotion." She said she was heartened by the tremendous response from the audience and circus fans who were attending, but was grieving. "You start to realize that it is only a few more months and we will be out," she said. "Then you calm yourself down and life goes on, until once again you think 'oh my God. Why? Why?'"<sup>29</sup>





*The King Charles Troupe, first featured on the Blue Unit in 1969.*

Fred Serex

After the matinee performance on March 9, 10-year-old Julissa Beltran of Newark wasn't ready for the show to end. Julissa had seen the circus a few years before when the elephants were still a part of the show. She knew that the show was ending forever, and she missed the elephants. She asked "Can we do it again?" Before anyone could respond she quickly said, "So if I want to see it again I'll have to buy some elephants."<sup>30</sup>

**Mar. 17-19 – Trenton, New Jersey**  
**(Sun National Bank Center) 51 Miles**  
**Railroad: CSX – Tickets \$15-70**

For Kaseem Alamudeen of the King Charles Troupe, playing in Trenton was a bit of a homecoming. He's a Burlington County native, and some of his family was on hand for the shows at the Sun National Bank Center. When asked he said he had mixed emotions about being in Trenton for the last time with the circus. "You're part of this chapter that has been so historical for America. I feel very humbled to be associated with it, and sad because it's coming to an end."<sup>31</sup>

Before *Out of This World* was framed in the summer of 2016, Ashley Vargas had worked as a trick rider on horses and been a part of the both the Red and Blue Units since she was in her teens. When the new show needed ice skaters, Vargas' ability to figure skate gave her an advantage with the new production. While in Trenton she was asked about any sadness she might have about the show closing.

Her response reflected a very positive outlook on the experience. "It's kind of bittersweet in a way, and super sad, but what's cool is going to all these cities and seeing everyone." She then added, "It was a great show even before they announced it was ending, and it's a great show to go out with – with a big bang."<sup>32</sup>

**Mar. 23-26 – Richmond, Virginia**  
**(Richmond Coliseum) 573 Miles –**  
**Railroads: CSX, Norfolk Southern**  
**Tickets \$15 and up**

Although it is only a 255 mile drive from Philadelphia to Richmond, the circuitous train route almost doubled the distance. For this stand the two units were showing less than 100 miles apart, as the Red Unit was also in Virginia, giving performances in Norfolk.

The Richmond Coliseum has been home to *The Greatest Show on Earth* since February of 1972, and this was the 46<sup>th</sup> time the show played the arena. Because of the strong feelings the people of Virginia have for the circus, *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* asked its readers to submit some of their memories of the show and they responded. The stories that follow personify the importance that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey has played with generations of Virginians:

"Joey Mirabile of Innsbrook, asked his girlfriend Candy Partridge to marry him at the circus in 2004 in front of a large crowd. She said yes, and they were married later that year. 'It worked out well, and we had a blast,' Mirabile said. Something else he remembers about that visit to the circus: 'For the rest of the day, I couldn't go to the bathroom without somebody saying, 'Hey, congratulations!'"

"Arlene Susling of Henrico County told the newspaper said she has two favorite memories of attending the circus, both involving Gunther Gebel-Williams. 'At one performance, Gunther walked around outside of the cage with a leopard draped around his neck,' she wrote. 'I couldn't help but think, 'That's the kind of fur stole I like – one that's still breathing.' I never forgot that image.' After Gunther retired, his son took over the act. I was sitting down front and could see Gunther wearing circus roustabout coveralls, his blond hair showing





*Top left, Hans Klose and his wife, Mariya Sumana, present one of their performing dogs.*

Fred Serex

*Top right, The Cossack Riders enter the ring.*

Fred Serex

*Left, Alexander Lacey and Masai*

Fred Serex



under his cap, standing by the cage, ready to help his son should the need arise. Gunther was the main reason I attended the circus. He was amazing.'

"Paul Shelley Sr. of Henrico was active in an organization of employers that obtained discounts for their employees to various events, including the circus. 'When the circus came to town, we sold plenty of tickets to our employees and, as a result, the group was invited to provide one clown and one honorary ringmaster for a performance,' Shelley recalled. 'In 1979 I was lucky enough to be selected as a clown. It was a wonderful experience.' He said he did have an important job. He was to open the door to a Volkswagen as the professional clowns piled in. The clown car! 'I forget how many, but it was a lot of clowns and the Volkswagen was gutted on the inside so that a lot of clowns could fit in it. My job was to open the door, let a clown in, shut the door, look silly, open the door again for another clown to get in – and do this over and over until the Volkswagen was full of clowns. Then I was supposed to look around like I was confused and wondering where all of the clowns went until they told me to open the door, let a clown out, close the door, look surprised, open the door again, let another clown out, shut the door, look surprised, etc., etc., over and over again until they all got out of the Volkswagen.'"<sup>33</sup>

Following Sunday's performances in Richmond the train was loaded for the trip north to the Nation's Capital. Shortly after leaving Richmond the next morning, the train struck a disabled tractor trailer rig that had stalled on the tracks near the town of Burkeville, Virginia. The train was traveling at a relatively slow speed and no one was injured either on the train or in the cab of the truck. After an investigation by Virginia State Police the 56 cars of the circus train continued to the historic CSX Benning Yards near the Anacostia River in Washington, D.C.

**Mar. 30-Apr. 2 – Washington, D.C.**  
**(Verizon Center) 109 Miles – Railroad: CSX,**  
**Norfolk Southern – Tickets \$15-100**

Washington, D.C. is where Feld Entertainment has its roots, and for the entire month of April the show would give performances in the region. From the District of Columbia to suburban Fairfax County, Virginia and east to

Baltimore, this is Feld Country. Irvin Feld and his brother Israel were born in nearby Hagerstown, Maryland and in the 1930s they began selling medicinal snake oil at carnivals. The Feld brothers achieved their first major success in Washington with a combination pharmacy/record store, which led to concert promotions and, in 1967, the purchase of the circus from the Ringling family.

For years the circus maintained its headquarters on New Mexico Avenue in Northwest Washington, later moving to suburban Vienna, Virginia, and in 2012 relocating its corporate offices to Ellenton, Florida. Since 2013 Feld has used a nearly 250,000 square foot warehouse in Jessup, Maryland for distribution of concession items and other supplies to its various live productions around the world.

Each season Kenneth Feld has been a regular at the show while it is in the Washington area and 2017 was no exception. Throughout the month of April the CEO of Feld Entertainment was frequently seen at performances and backstage in Washington, Fairfax and Baltimore.

Despite Feld's presence and his meetings with performers and others, as crews set up for the final D.C. engagement at the Verizon Center March 30, the corporate line remained the same as it had been since the announcement on January 14. "It's a massive production, and it's an expensive production," said spokesman Stephen Payne as he watched the rigging being set up. "Ringling Bros. has always been about seeing the most amazing human and animal performers, which you couldn't see anywhere else. When it started, there was no television. Now there's, what, a thousand channels? It's just a very different entertainment landscape than it used to be," he said.<sup>34</sup>

Still, for Sarah Kaufmann of the *Washington Post*, the performance evoked a kind excitement a thousand television channels could never provide as she painted word pictures of the performance:

"The two horses gallop side by side at full speed, around and around the ring at the climax of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus, which opened its final Washington show Friday as part of its farewell tour. Verizon Center pounds with the sound of drums. (Or is it the thumping of thousands of hearts in the crowd?)

"Each speeding horse bears a man on its back, and astride them, one dainty foot on a shoulder of each rider, stands a woman in yellow tights. The horses race so fast around the curves that they lean in, and the trio of riders leans, too.

"There's an unbearable instant of doubt as the



gap between the horses widens and the riders' bare arms bulge as they work the reins. Still the horses run, more apart than together, yoked only by the agile young woman who is now stretched in a full split between them.

"Welcome to the Greatest Show on *Earrrrth*," ringmaster Johnathan Lee Iverson had bellowed, two hours earlier. The staples are all here: clowns and aerialists, lions and tigers, motorcycles whizzing at highway speeds in a steel-mesh globe. There's no small amount of novelty, including a tightrope act on a teardrop-shaped wheel, with three wire-walkers from Hungary gliding airily on its rim as the wheel swoops and rises under their toes. At one point, clear plastic globes descend from the arena's ceiling. Inside, unfurling themselves like fiddlehead ferns, are tiny acrobats.

"But nothing captures the danger, skill and sheer miracle of the circus like these equestrians. One rider places a hand on the woman's ankle as her foot slips off his shoulder. The crowd may be breathless in an agony of fear, but he's as calm and expressionless as a nun. The woman has never stopped smiling."<sup>35</sup>

The reporter ended her review with a sentiment that has been shared by those who love the circus, and who will soon find that it is gone forever:

"It feels like exactly the wrong time to lose the circus, in a world of stresses that seem to multiply daily: uncertain job prospects, social isolation, political turmoil. Have we ever been more in need of miracles?

"The circus keeps some of the most cherished human dreams alive: the longing for flight, freedom and unshakable trust embodied by the trapeze artists; the unity of human and animal perfected by the lion tamer. The dream of staring down fate and carrying on with grace.

"The circus has long offered a refuge for misfits and restless thrill seekers, and if it's no longer so easy to run away and join it, it's a lovely myth nonetheless, part of the American ideal of reinvention. Circus folks live out what, for the rest of us, are fantasies.

"There are other circuses, certainly, but Ringling Bros. is the Taj Mahal."<sup>36</sup>

**Apr. 7-15 – Fairfax, Virginia**  
(Eagle Bank Arena) 0 Miles (Train remained at Washington's Benning Yards) – Tickets \$18-125

When the announcement was made in January that the circus would be closing, Barry Geisler, general manager of the Eagle Bank Arena, in Fairfax, Virginia expressed his concern. The circus performances at the arena on the campus of George Mason University was the largest annual event at the venue, and while Geisler wouldn't disclose how much the circus generated in revenue each year, he did say he expected record crowds for the final performances. "We expect that business will be really strong because it will be the last opportunity for people in the Washington area to see the circus."<sup>37</sup>

Geisler's prediction was correct, and huge crowds passed through the turnstiles, yet for many of those on both units the new found enthusiasm for the show was confounding. Ticket sales were excellent, dozens of shows were selling out. But where were these fans in 2016 or 2015?

The response to the performances at George Mason University's Eagle Bank Arena were typical of what had been seen on both shows since the January 14 announcement. It was clear that circus enthusiasm was still very high. The packed houses applauded Alexander Lacey as his lions and tigers leapt over one another, gasped as Davis Vassallo the wire-walking clown milked his act for laughs, and chuckled as Hans and Mariya Klose's 700-pound hog glided down a sliding board and "jumped" over inches-high hurdles.



Davis Vassallo

Fred Serex



Among those who wanted to experience the historic event at the Eagle Bank Arena was Carolyn Perez who brought her two-year old Ava to the show. While she knew her young daughter would never remember the day, she could always tell her that she had been a part of history. "We heard that this was the last time that the circus was going to be in town, so we wanted to share that experience with our daughter," she said. "It made me sad when I heard it was closing. This is such a magical experience, for so many of us who grew up coming to the circus."<sup>38</sup>

Not everyone shared that nostalgic sentiment as animal rights activists continued to dog the circus at every performance. While the show was in Fairfax Kenneth Feld once again addressed the challenges the show had faced in an interview with *The New York Times*, and how animal rights wasn't the only factor in his decision to close the show. "We won in court – and obviously in the court of public opinion we didn't prevail. There has been more change in the last decade than in the preceding 70 years. The circus had to be all things to all people. Now we live in a world of specialization."<sup>39</sup>

One interesting note about the Eagle Bank Arena dates. George Mason University is so close to Washington, D.C. that the train wasn't moved for the engagement, and special charter buses left every 30 minutes from the rail yards, taking performers and crew from the Anacostia district of Washington to the arena Fairfax, Virginia. Still because of Washington's notorious traffic jams that relatively short distance of 25 miles, could stretch into a 90-minute trip.



Priscilla and Johnathan Lee Iverson with their children Matthew and Lila on the train  
Johnathan Lee Iverson

#### Apr. 20-30 – Baltimore, Maryland (Royal Farms Arena) 36 Miles – Railroad: CSX Tickets \$15-50

The 11 day stand in Baltimore was the longest of the season for *Out of This World*. The train crew particularly liked this stand because the cars are spotted not far from the B&O Railroad Museum and you could usually find a few members of the crew making a trip to the historic birthplace of American railroading.

Since the announcement was made that the show was closing, many of the Ringling performers had been reaching out to other shows and applying for positions across the country. It was in Baltimore where fourth generation Italian clown Davis Vassallo publicly announced that he would be returning to Europe at the end of the season. Others such as skater and former trick rider Ashley Vargas kept their cards close the vest, yet hinting she would like to continue her career with the circus. "Once you have the sawdust in your veins, you don't want to get out of it," she said. "You go on to other amazing jobs."<sup>40</sup>

Even before the show arrived, the General Manager of the Royal Farms Arena was waxing nostalgic about the circus. Frank Remesch, who managed what was once known as the Baltimore Arena, said he has fond memories of the circus, as it was the very first event he can remember attending at the arena when he was only a child.

Remesch said the circus has historically been one of his biggest attractions, but he added that he had already been talking to Feld Entertainment about bringing in one



The Iverson family with teachers David Schwarz, Sheilah Tarbell, and Lauren Soloman  
Johnathan Lee Iverson





*At the top left, contortionists perform during Out of This World.*

Fred Serex

*At the top right, Katie Lacey presenting a mixed animal act.*

Fred Serex

*Left, a concession stand in Trenton, New Jersey*

Fred Serex



of their other shows in 2018, and they told him to hold the dates.

The longtime arena manager said there may be no way to replace the tradition and nostalgia the circus brought every year to Baltimore, but he was holding out hope that bringing in additional concerts as well as more family-friendly shows would fill the financial void. "On one side, it is sad to see the tradition go, but on the financial side, it makes it a little more edgy."<sup>41</sup>

**May 4-May 7 – Charleston, West Virginia  
(Charleston Civic Center) 486 Miles – Railroads:  
CSX, Norfolk Southern – Tickets \$15-85**

The people of Charleston, West Virginia welcomed the big show back with open arms and that meant more sell-outs at the Civic Center. Before the first performance on Thursday a group of performers were taken to the Charleston Town Center Mall, the same location where, for 18 years the Ringling herd had appeared each season for their "Elephant Brunch." In fact the elephant appearances were such an important piece of local history that the city has placed a cast of an elephant footprint at the entrance to the mall to commemorate the relationship between Charleston and the circus.

Hundreds of locals turned out for the "Welcome Back" event where Mayor Danny Jones presented Johnathan Lee Iverson with a city proclamation declaring May 4, 2017 as "Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Day in Charleston." The crowd delighted in putting on red noses, signing cards, eating cake and talking with some of the performers who had been entertaining them for years.<sup>42</sup>

Mayor Jones even brought along a photograph from 1976. Those on hand cheered as he told the story of being put on an elephant by Gunther Gebel-Williams over 40 years ago.<sup>43</sup>

Sunday May 4 was an exceptionally somber day for those performing in the Charleston Civic Center and on the train. Although the performance itself was quite strong and the Civic Center was sold out, the cast and crew knew that in another arena in Providence, Rhode Island the sentence that was handed down in Miami and Orlando on January 14 was being carried out.

At the conclusion of the evening performance on the evening of May 4 the Red Unit closed forever. While some in Charleston were receiving photo texts and Facebook alerts from their colleagues in Providence, others such as Tatiana Tchalabaeva said she couldn't look for fear of the

emotions that would be released.<sup>44</sup>

"In an interview with the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, Ringmaster Iverson spoke from the heart, 'People don't realize how much they're losing,' he said. 'We've become so jaded, so self-centered and distracted, as a country and a culture, we're imploding. What's happened is a tragedy.'<sup>45</sup>

**May 12-21 – Uniondale, New York  
(Nassau Coliseum) 740 Miles – Railroads: Norfolk  
Southern, CSX, Long Island Railroad  
Tickets \$15-300**

Those who have had the privilege of riding a circus train know that it isn't the fastest way to get from point-A to point-B. It does however offer the opportunity to relax and contemplate life. It seems rather appropriate that the two longest runs for the Blue Unit were immediately after the announcement was made in Miami when the train traveled 825 miles to Birmingham, and the last train run ever, 740 miles from Charleston to Uniondale.

For Johnathan Lee Iverson those final train rides with his family were a time for reflection and meditation. When asked about the trip from Charleston to Uniondale he said, "It was very pleasant. The family stood on the vestibule a little more and took some pictures. We were prepared for it and it settled into our consciousness that this was the last ride."<sup>46</sup>

After 18 years as a highly visible icon for the circus, Iverson, in his ringmaster role, had indeed become a de-facto leader on the show. In a candid conversation with the author he discussed some of the things he contemplated while traveling between Charleston and Uniondale, and his perspective on the events of the previous four months.

On the decision to close the show:

"Obviously there may be things I'm not privy to. I'm not questioning the intelligence of the owners of the show. I probably would have shut the thing down earlier because it is a headache to run and it costs a lot of money. It needs constant supervision. It isn't theatre. The circus is the celebration of living things and you are dealing with the highest levels of artistry. I once had a conversation with Nicole Feld. She was talking about the current challenges. I told her, in my humble employee opinion, 'You need to find a team of people who love the dogged work of the circus and who are smarter than you and that will solve your problems.'"



On his 18 year career as ringmaster:

"The fact of the matter is I wasn't entitled to anything but a check and what was put on my contract, but I got so much more. Where else can you go to work and come out with a family, and the entire family gets a check from the company! For anyone who has ever worked with Feld and Ringling Bros. they know there is nothing like *The Greatest Show on Earth* because it is a culture. Nobody does this. Not in opera. Not in theatre. Not in film. This is vastly different."

On the future:

"My only concern is acclimating myself to life outside of the wonderful, joyous safe bubble. Normal life has its advantages, still nobody is flying and no one is talking to animals! I don't expect things to be like the old days. The only constant is change."<sup>47</sup>



*The Tchalabaev Cossack Riders*

Fred Serex

As the train made its way to Long Island, others were driving to the Nassau Coliseum, including Tatiana and Kanat Tchalabaev, with their 21 horses. The Tchalabaev Cossack riding act was a featured display in *Out of This World*, and as "Queen Tatiana, the Intergalactic Space Queen," the veteran acrobat and equestrian was one of the stars of the show. Unlike most of those on the show, the Tchalabaevs were responsible not only for their own family and horses, but also for a troupe of 15 riders and five grooms.

"You start looking at everything from different perspectives" said Tatiana. "You ask yourself why and you don't want this to happen. By the time we got to Long Island and unloaded the horses, the show was set up. We went inside the arena and I looked at it. I thought, how sad it is. How sad that it won't happen again. I watched everyone doing their job and thought, this is something that we have been done together and I want to continue for a long time."<sup>48</sup>

The Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum, in Uniondale, New York opened February 11, 1972 and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus was one of the first shows to play the brand-new arena with a 13-day stand on October 31 of that year.<sup>49</sup> Although the circus had entertained metropolitan New Yorkers at Madison Square Garden for decades, the 1972 performances of the Blue Unit in Uniondale were the first time the show had returned to Long Island since June 12-13, 1956 when it played Hicksville, New York and delivered the first straw-house of that final season under canvas.<sup>50</sup>

The success of that first stand at the Nassau Coliseum in 1972 was a harbinger of things to come, as the Uniondale arena became a mainstay of the Ringling route with both the Red and Blue Units consistently playing to large crowds for the next 45 years.

The Hicksville circus fans of 1956 who attended that final circus under canvas on Long Island didn't know it would be the last time Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey would put up its big top in their town, a sharp contrast to those who bought tickets to see *Out of This World* in May of 2017.

Because of the historic nature of the final shows, speculators and ticket brokers began scooping up tickets for the final performances only hours after the announcement was made January 14.

At one point the secondary ticket broker StubHub was offering tickets for the evening performance on May 21 at \$163 a seat on the upper level, and \$2,000 each on the lower level, an increase of 560% over the face value of the tickets.<sup>51</sup> It should be noted that for some speculators the gamble



apparently didn't pay off, as the author counted dozens of empty seats while attending both the matinee and evening performances on May 21.

The final stand for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey opened on Friday May 12 and over the next 10 days the cast and crew presented 16 performances, with thousands on hand for each show. Uniondale's opening night performance was described the next day in a laudatory review by *Newsday's* Steve Parks.

"Big cats were much in evidence inside the arena as trainer Alexander Lacey directed 14 through a desultory performance, except for two tigers who walked upright across the caged ring and a male lion who lap-danced (sort of) the trainer.

"Kids and their parents relate to smaller animals. Dogs of all sizes did their usual athletic stunts to oohs and ahs. But it was delightfully comic to see them joined by two behemoth hogs, plus goats, llamas and a lone kangaroo who, naturally, out-jumped them all.

"Among humans, the Tunziani trapeze artists just missed a four-revolution somersault and catch. The Fearless Torres motorcyclist family spun at blurring speeds, up to seven bikes in a mesh globe barely large enough to contain them. The King Charles Troupe, fresh and flashy in their Globetrotters-on-unicycles contest, were decisive winners. Jester Davis Vassallo led the clown contingent in distracting us from setups for the next attraction.

"The theme to this last-ever Ringling show, *Out of This World*, introduces a video game spaceship-on-ice concept – too late to be saved by a younger generation. The ringmaster competes with "evil" Tatiana Tchalabaeva for the galaxy's best circus performers. Among them are Circus of Fire stilt-walkers and skate acrobats slashing on ice, and the Cossack Riders: To describe it would give away one of their amazing feats without doing it justice."<sup>52</sup>

The weekend of May 13-14 was a typical "six pack," with three shows on Saturday and three on Sunday. There was a 10:30 a.m. "Kiddie Show" on Monday May 15, followed by a 7:00 p.m. performance, with no shows on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday of that final week. For Iverson and others the three-day break allowed them to tie up loose ends and prepare to move off the train after the final performance.<sup>53</sup>



*Alexander Lacey leads one of the tigers.*

Paul Gutheil

Friday May 19 began with a news conference where several acts performed before the cameras and the media asked questions to both performers and management about the closing. Alana Feld spoke to reporters and reiterated the statements that her father and sister had made in Miami and Orlando in January. "As a business decision, it was the right thing to do, but from a personal perspective, it wasn't an easy decision to make."<sup>54</sup> The 7:00 p.m. performance that night brought another full house to the Nassau Coliseum.

The historic final weekend of May 20-21 consisted of another "six pack," with performances at 11:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. both Saturday and Sunday. For many of those with the show their emotions were tempered somewhat by those who were arriving in Uniondale to see old friends and share a common bond.

"It was very hectic, and between shows I didn't have one free minute," said Tatiana Tchalabaeva, reflecting back on that final Sunday. "We saw a lot of people we hadn't seen in years, but it was very restricted and it was a shame that we weren't able to meet with all of the circus fans who were there."<sup>55</sup>

Johnathan Lee Iverson said he was well prepared for the final show Sunday evening. "I promised myself I wouldn't get caught up in the moment," he said. "I knew it was going to be an emotional day, and there was a kind of energy that got us through it."<sup>56</sup>

Two weeks earlier Feld announced that the May 21<sup>st</sup>





*The Flying Tuniziani trapeze act*

Fred Serex



*The cast and crew of Out of This World*

Rhett Coates





Tatiana Tchalabaeva

Paul Gutheil

performance would be broadcast on Facebook Live, giving circus fans worldwide the opportunity to watch the final moments of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Sam Gomez, vice president of digital and relationship marketing at Feld Entertainment, said the on-line presentation would be produced with the understanding that many people would be watching on smartphones or tablets. "It's basically a TV shoot," said Gomez. "We've had lots of conversations about

tight shots so you can see the performers' skill and expressions and their artistry.<sup>57</sup>

The broadcast, seen on both Facebook Live and YouTube, was hosted by former Red Unit Ringmasters Kristen Michelle Wilson and David Shipman who were broadcasting from an anchor desk inside the Coliseum. The show began with Ashley Vargas and Johnathan Lee Iverson at the center of the arena welcoming the audience and introducing Kenneth Feld. Feld walked to the center of the arena with his wife Bonnie, along with daughters Juliette, Nicole and Alana who were joined by their families. After briefly embracing Iverson he began to address the audience:

"Good evening everybody. It is incredibly heartwarming to see all of you that have come out for the final performance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. On behalf of the entire Feld family, we not only want to thank you for coming out tonight, but for all of the support that you have given Ringling Bros. over the years. In the 50 years that our family has been producing Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, over a quarter-of-a-billion people have seen the shows. It's always been our goal to be able to share with families the incredible experience; the joy, the happiness and the wonderment of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. And I think we have accomplished that goal...."

At that point Feld briefly choked up and paused as he composed himself.



The Feld family enters the ring before the final performance in Uniondale, New York.

Paul Gutheil



"Over the years I've been asked 'what makes Ringling Bros. the great American institution that it is?' It is the people. It's the spirit, the dedication, the perseverance of everyone that you'll see tonight that makes the impossible – possible. They have always been an inspiration for us, and they should really be an inspiration for everyone on how we conduct our lives. It is incredible to have this experience not only with these people, but to see how this town without a zip code works. The teamwork. The family. And how they come together day-in and day-out as Olympians. No matter what it is, they rise to the top and they are the reason that they are and this is *The Greatest Show on Earth*. So I want to thank everyone, whether you see them tonight or behind the scenes. They are very special people and we love them all. So from the bottom of our hearts we want to say thank you all very much and please enjoy and celebrate *The Greatest Show on Earth*, one last time. Thank you."<sup>58</sup>

For Ringmaster Iverson, Feld's decision to address the crowd before the final performance reinforced the character of a man who he had come to know well over the previous 18 seasons. "He had the courage and decency to face the audience," said Iverson. "Quite frankly in today's world few people would do this. Integrity matters, and I think Kenneth and his family presented that at the final performance."<sup>59</sup>

That two-hour and seven-minute performance was bursting with emotional moments, but none perhaps as poignant as the comments made by wild animal trainer Alexander Lacey who paused in the middle of his 12-minute act to address the challenges the circus has faced from animal rights activists.

Lacey spoke of his family's dedication to animal training and breeding, and briefly choked-up as he spoke of his love for wild animals, and of the importance of supporting circuses. "It's so important that if you love animals as much as I do that you have to keep supporting those people who dedicate their lives to these animals," he said, adding "people aren't really concerned about wildlife until they feel it and see it, and enjoy it, and love it as much as I do," his voice cracking.

"It's so important that you carry on supporting all of those people who dedicate their lives to these animals. Support good, well-run circuses," he said as he emphatically pumped his fist in the air. "Support good, well-run zoos,"

he implored, as he was interrupted by sustained applause. He then thanked Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for their continued support of his act and breeding programs over the past six seasons.<sup>60</sup>

The program continued with an outstanding performance by the Tuniziani Trapeze act. Although Ammed (Garcia) Tuniziani had succeeded with a quadruple somersault at the Sunday matinee performance, he unfortunately missed it in the evening show.

Other notable acts included Davis Vassallo, the principal clown who spoke about his experience on that last day. "It was the greatest," Vassallo said.

"I think everybody got inspired by Ringling because Ringling is unique. The best artists, the best performers. They always did the best show in the world. It was something special, something unique. It's not about the money. Many companies have lots of money to do a show, but nobody did it like Ringling.

"When I came here the first time, it was something magic when I stepped on the ring. I was thinking: where I'm standing now, all the best performers in the world, they passed here. As a circus person, you could feel that. You are in history. And I'm so happy that I'm going to be in the history when this ends: I'm going to be the last clown of Ringling.

"I'm not happy the circus is closing, but I'm happy that I did come here. That I was part of it."<sup>61</sup>

The final display on the program was the Cossack riding act trained by Kanat Tchalabaev. When the act finished, the storyline of *Out of This World* concluded with a final production number featuring the entire company. The finale brought the audience to its feet, as thousands acknowledged the significance of the moment with a sustained standing ovation.

This particular performance however ended differently than the others of the 2017 season, as those in costume were immediately joined on the floor by family members and their colleagues who worked behind the scenes on the production.

For nine minutes cast and crew crowded the arena floor, hugging, weeping and taking photographs as Iverson acknowledged those responsible for transportation, concessions and every department of the circus. After thanking the entire circus family from the train crew and lighting





Johnathan Lee Iverson

Dan Kleintop

designers to wardrobe and the prop crew, Iverson led the cast and those in the audience in the season-ending tradition of *Auld Lang Syne*.

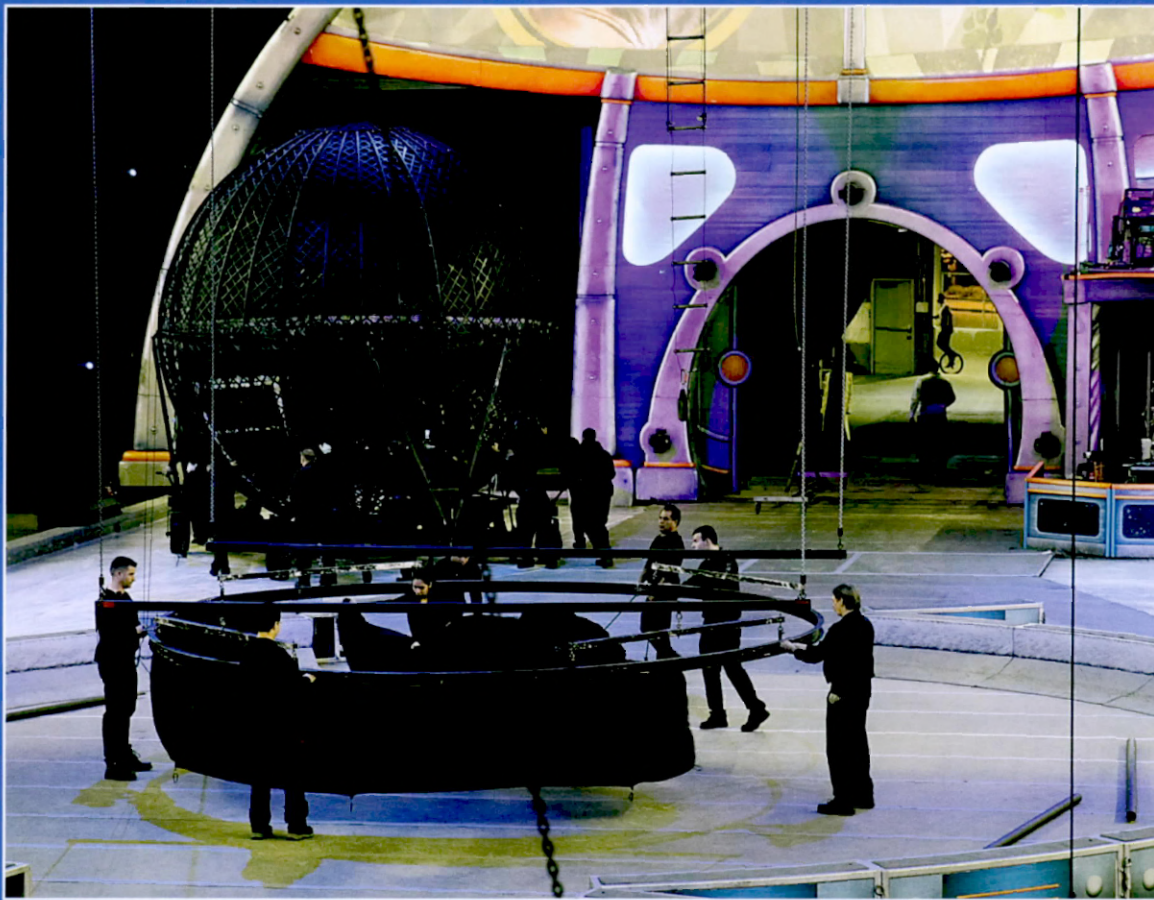
As the program came to its inevitable conclusion, Iverson made his last comments as ringmaster. "You have just witnessed the final presentation of this American treasure, this American icon, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Now and forever more *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Ladies and gentlemen, keep the circus alive inside you! We have been an American institution for 146 years and we hope the memories we have made together will last you a lifetime. May all your days be Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Days.

Farewell from *The Greatest Show on Earth*."<sup>62</sup> **BW**

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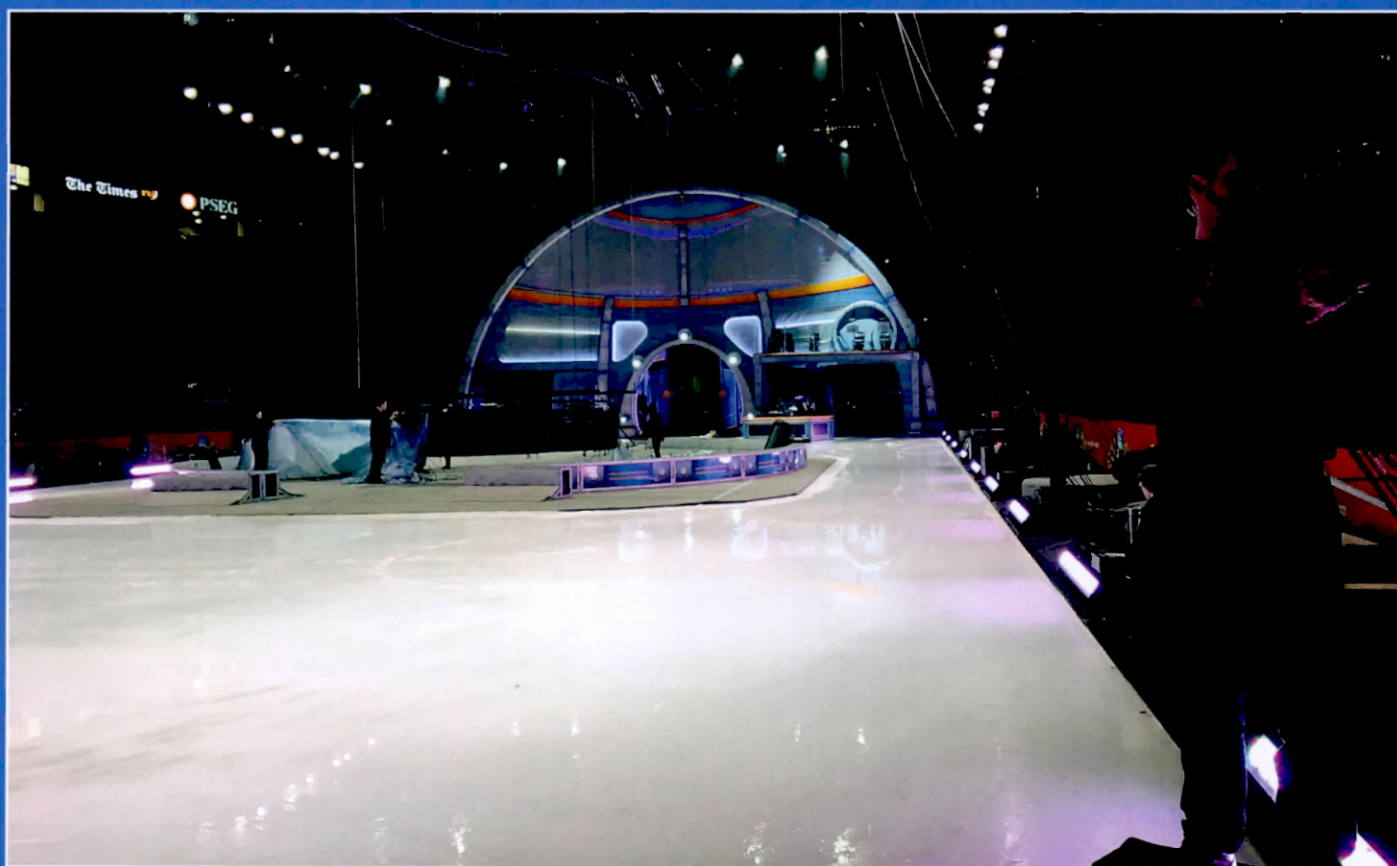


*Top, the crew sets up the Globe of Steel*

Rhett Coates

*Bottom, setting up inside the Sun National Bank Center, Trenton, New Jersey*

Fred Serex







*Above, setting  
up for the cat act*  
Fred Serex

*Right, wagons  
outside the  
Sun National  
Bank Center in  
Trenton, New  
Jersey*  
Fred Serex







*Tatiana Tchalabaeva with some of the ice skaters on the Blue Unit*

Tatiana Tchalabaeva



*Members of the Blue Unit's train crew*

Rhett Coates





*The Cossack Troupe*

*Tatiana Tchalabaeva*



*Priscilla Iverson and part of the crew that helped stage Out of This World*

*Rhett Coates*



RINGLING BROS. & BARNUM & BAILEY  
THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

FINAL  
FAREWELL



CIRCUS  
XTREME



EXPERIENCE THE CIRCUS ONE LAST TIME

DUNKIN' DONUTS  
CENTER PROVIDENCE

MAY 4 – 7





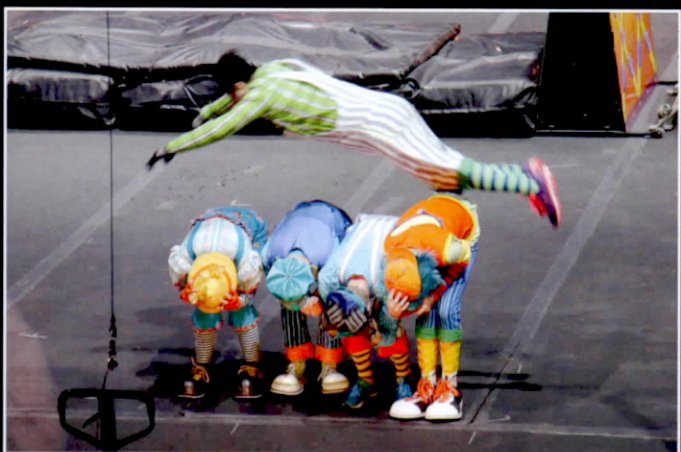
*Left top, Kristen Michelle Wilson*

Dan Kleintop



*Left bottom, Taba Maluenda performs with the tigers.*

Angelina Hovazhenko



*Left top, the Red Unit clowns*

Dan Kleintop



*Left bottom, the Red Unit train makes its way through wintry weather.*

Angelina Hovazhenko

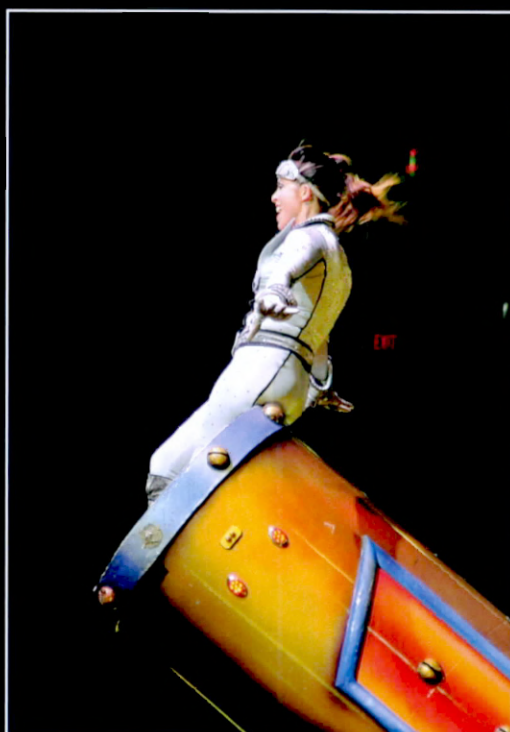


*Right, Mustafa Danguir and troupe perform on the high wire.*

Shannon Kunkle

*Opposite page, a window card for the final season of Circus Xtreme.*

The Ringling Museum



*Right, Nicole Sanders enters the cannon.*

Shannon Kunkle





Performers hold the flag during the singing of the National Anthem.

Dan Kleintop

## Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey *Circus Xtreme (Red Unit)*

*by Chris Berry*

Jan. 12-16 – Orlando, Florida  
(Amway Center) – Tickets \$16-75

"We all knew it was going to be some giant announcement," recalled Megan O'Malley. For five seasons she played trombone in the Red Unit band, joining *Fully Charged* in the spring of 2012. "The fact it was a mandatory meeting was very unusual. When we first heard the Blue Unit was having a meeting in Miami, we didn't think it had anything to do with us. Then a half hour later the notice was posted."<sup>1</sup>

Her boss of the past five years, bandleader and trumpet player Brett Barlow had a bad feeling when he saw the backstage notice after the morning performance January 14. "In 23 years with the show I heard every rumor. Maybe Disney was going to buy the show. Maybe there would be a permanent show in Orlando," he said. "At the same time that I saw the notice backstage I received a text message from Ryan States, the keyboard player on the Blue Unit.

He said they were also having a meeting after their evening show in Miami. Then I saw (Feld spokesman) Steve Payne and I knew it was something bad."<sup>2</sup>

In a business long associated with hyperbole, it is fair to say that a legion of circus press agents couldn't adequately describe the enormous sense of anxiety settling over the Amway Center that Saturday afternoon. For hours speculation swept through the arena and train, yet despite the uncertainty of the mysterious meeting, two shows were presented and none of those in the audience could fathom the unsettled feeling shared by the performers and crew.

"I was nervous," said Irina Prostetsova, a featured performer on the show. "I told (General Manager) Rob Lange that I was stressed and wanted to go back to the train. He told me he really needed me there for the meeting. People were talking and someone said, 'I think the circus is going to shut down.' I thought that might be possible but was relieved that we just signed a new contract in November. I



## Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Red Unit Closure Announcement

The following is a transcription of an audio recording taken by an employee of the Ringling Bros. Red Unit at the Amway Center in Orlando FL on Saturday January 14, 2017 at a full-cast meeting called by Feld Entertainment after the final Saturday evening performance. All employees were required to attend. Primary speaker is Juliette Feld, COO of Feld Entertainment at that time. All statements in this transcript are direct quotes unless otherwise noted by SQUARED brackets [ ]. Timestamps are included for reference.

[00:00:09] **Juliette Feld:** Hello everyone.

(Misc. greetings from employees)

[00:00:14] **Juliette Feld:** Thank you all for gathering tonight, can everyone hear me?

(Misc. response from employees)

[00:00:21] **Juliette Feld:** Um...I know many of you, for those of you who don't know me, I'm Juliette Feld. Tonight, I have some very difficult news to share with all of you. We have made the decision...as...a family, and as a company, to close both tours of Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey circus...in May of this year. (pause) This tour will be closing following your performances on May 7<sup>th</sup>, in Providence Rhode Island. And the Blue Unit will be closing after their run in Uniondale New York, on May 21<sup>st</sup>. (pause) We...over the past ten years, we've seen a steady decline in ticket sales and attendance at Ringling Brothers. And, as all of you...have...have likely observed, since we...took the elephants off of the units, attendance has dropped off...much more than we ever could have anticipated...and...made the business...unsustainable. We...have tried many different advertising campaigns, promotions, initiatives of all kinds to...do anything to [not have to make] this decision...and, unfortunately, nothing has worked to change the downward trend. It's so important that all of you know...how incredible you are, and how much you continue to inspire and amaze us with everything that you do. And, that is unchanged. And we have the utmost respect for you, and every day you go out, regardless of how many people are in the audience, and you do your absolute best. And, it's because of all of you that this has been *The Greatest Show on Earth*, and will continue to be for the next...few months. And, there are going to be fans who come out who want to support you, and see you, and who adore you, and

I know that you will give them the show that they came to see.

[00:02:40] cont'd, **Juliette Feld:** I know that you have a lot of questions. Over the next few weeks, Kirk McCoy, the HR team will be out here, they'll be meeting each of you individually, to go over...how we will be helping you with this transition and the support we'll be providing each of you. And our family will be out, to see all of you before the units close. Thank you so much for everything you do, and... (crying) I'm sorry to...bring you this news tonight. I'm going to turn it over to Kirk McCoy, who has some more information for all of you. Thank you.

(Shocked applause)

[00:03:25] **Kirk McCoy:** I'll give everybody a second to absorb, what...what Juliette just said...um, she said we're, we're gonna run through Providence, through May 7<sup>th</sup>. Um, starting next week, in Jacksonville, we're gonna sit down with everybody in this room. We have a packet of information for you. Everything from contract information, to immigration information, so, all the pertinent stuff. One of us, either Rob Neiman, or Rob Lange, or myself, or Harry Sugarman someone who will be sitting with you in Jacksonville, next week starting to, to explain what the process is going to be. We're gonna be available for questions the whole time, we're not gonna just end it at Jacksonville, we're gonna stick with you and we're gonna, you're gonna see, some of you...I know...my reputation, you don't like seeing me come to the show, that's all right...you're gonna see more...from now through May than you've ever seen so we will always be here for questions...and we'll be able to be contacted, you can contact Rob, you can contact anybody, we're gonna train the management team on the unit to also answer some of your basic questions. So...(pause) we'll be there, you'll have your own individualized information, and be good to go. Are there any general questions right now?

(brief pause)

[00:04:42] **Kirk McCoy:** Ok, I know this is a lot to take in. So starting next Wednesday we'll sit with you. The way we have it tonight, is, um...I know you guys are used to having one bus, and so you don't need to make a big rush for the bus because we have brought in extra buses, there will be three Greyhound buses down there as well, for, to take you back to the train. Any questions?

[00:05:05] (End transcription. One person asks a question about the buses. Awkwardness as Mr. McCoy waits to confirm that buses are at the arena.)





*Top, the final Red Unit Clown Alley with their "Strongman Gag."*

Shannon Kunkle

*Middle, Circus Xtreme featured members of a troupe of Ukrainian acrobats billed as "Angelic Aerialists," seen here in the opening act.*

Shannon Kunkle

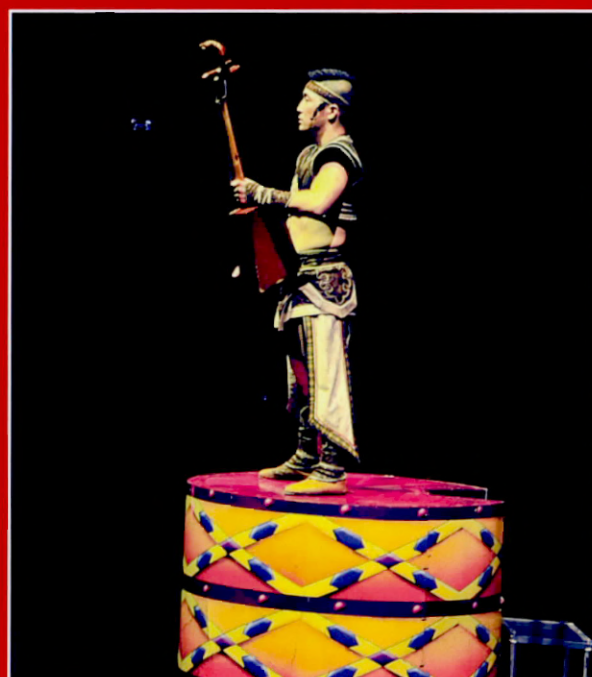


*Bottom left, Jessica Togni astride "Colonel," led by Alexandre Petrov.*

Shannon Kunkle

*Bottomright, DashkaDashii, one of the Mongolian performers on Circus Xtreme.*

Shannon Kunkle





thought to myself, 'We will still have 2017 and 2018. Maybe after 2018 it will be time to go.'"<sup>3</sup>

Peggy Williams, who spent 48 years as both a manager and performer, said those new contracts were one of the reasons many of those who worked at Feld Entertainment's corporate headquarters didn't suspect what was coming. "The performers were in a pretty good place. Buildings were being booked. We thought there would be a circus through 2018."<sup>4</sup>

That feeling was echoed by Kristen Michelle Wilson, the new female ringmaster who had joined the show in Nashville on December 11, 2016. "People were spreading rumors the circus might be closing, but it made no sense. They were spending considerable time and money promoting my new role so I thought there was no way the circus was going to close."<sup>5</sup>

The circus world has long been a melting pot of cultures, and in 2017 *Circus Xtreme* carried a cast and crew from 13 different countries including Mongolia, Hungary, Russia, China, and Chile.<sup>6</sup> Although the backstage announcement had been posted in four languages, for some in the crowded room that night it appeared not everyone grasped the serious nature of the meeting. "It was weird, because those who spoke English were very nervous, and those who didn't were laughing and chatting," according to Megan O'Malley. "Half of the room was very tense and the other half was joking."<sup>7</sup>

At 10:12 P.M., the exact same time that her father Kenneth was addressing the cast and crew of *Out of This World* in Miami, Juliette Feld entered the jam-packed fifth floor meeting room along with Feld Entertainment's Vice President of Human Resources Kirk McCoy, spokesman Stephen Payne and other show executives.

Although those in the room said afterward the announcement seemed very brief, a recording of Juliette Feld's comments indicates she spoke for about three minutes. As soon as she introduced herself she immediately announced that both shows would be closing in May and then explained some of the reasons, briefly choking up before regaining her composure. She spoke of the decline in ticket sales and the challenges of marketing the shows before turning it over McCoy. As she concluded there was an awkward smattering of applause from some of those in attendance.<sup>8</sup>

The show's new female ringmaster, Kristen Michelle Wilson was stunned. "You could hear a pin drop, because 300 people were just caught off guard," she said. "We were shocked. We were sad."<sup>9</sup>



*The Circus Xtreme band*

Megan O'Malley

Even though Wilson was only a month into her circus career, veteran bandleader Barlow, who had been with the Red Unit for 23 years, shared the emotions of the "First of May" ringmaster. After the meeting ended Barlow briefly spoke to a few people, but unlike most of those with the show, he wasn't dependent on taking one of the three chartered buses back to the rail yards. "I needed a little bit of time, so I rode my motorcycle from the arena back to the train."<sup>10</sup>

Clown Truett Adams also remembered how she felt. "I got up from my chair and left the room and as I was walking away from the room, it kind of came over me what it meant. There were definitely tears."<sup>11</sup>

Many more tears were shed that night, and in the days to come. For Irina Prostetsova and hundreds of others in both Orlando and Miami, the future suddenly seemed very murky. "I was very emotional that night, thinking about my children and their lives and what was ahead. I realized I don't have anyone here. I was wondering if I should move back to Moscow. I thought about my seven-year old who doesn't speak much Russian. What about my dogs?"<sup>12</sup>

Although Kristen Wilson was fresh to her role as ringmaster, she was a seasoned veteran of many traveling shows and definitely not a rookie in the world of show business. She spoke of the shared belief that the show must go on. "You watched hundreds of people burst into tears at the same time, and the next day, we came in and did three more shows."<sup>13</sup>

Still it wasn't easy. On Sunday the performers returned to the Amway Arena for what many described as a very challenging day. Among those feeling the pain was Nicole Sanders, who had joined the show as the Human Cannonball a year before, "We had to do three shows the next day and it was pretty awful. Some of us were doing dangerous



things and we couldn't let our emotions compromise our safety."<sup>14</sup>

For some the performance was made all the more difficult by animal rights protesters who flanked the arena with signs reading, "No more chains, no more beatings," and "The Cruellest Show on Earth." As those holding tickets streamed into the building one protester shouted "Enjoy your last show!" At least one circus fan flipped his middle finger at her.<sup>15</sup>

As word began to spread of the Orlando's final performances ever, fans from across Florida and nationwide began buying tickets. Monday January 16 was also Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and there was only one circus performance at 1:00 P.M. It was a sellout, foreshadowing a theme that would continue through the remainder of the season.

**Jan. 19-22 – Jacksonville, Florida**  
**(Veterans Memorial Arena) 144 Miles – Railroad:**  
**CSX – Tickets \$14-100**

There were seven performances over the three day stand in Jacksonville and ticket sales were very strong. Prior to the first performances at Veterans Memorial Arena, a pre-rehearsal meeting was held for the cast, who were told that because of the anticipated uptick in attendance, employees would no longer be able to get discounted tickets for friends and family.

Management also offered career counseling backstage all weekend long, something that Claudia Porter, who had spent eight years in the wardrobe department appreciated. "They were quite helpful," she said. "I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, or if I wanted them to help me find a job, but they talked about the importance of a good resume and how to interview for a job."<sup>16</sup>

Nicole Sanders also spoke briefly with the career counselors, "They asked what experience I had and I told them, along with the fact that I didn't think there would be much demand for a Human Cannonball."<sup>17</sup>

For those traveling with the show there was "a notable difference in everyone's attitude." Megan O'Malley recalled, "Usually on opening day people are relatively cheerful, talking and joking as we enter the building, roughhousing during rehearsal, etc....on that day we filed slowly and silently into the arena. We set up as usual. Occasionally I heard a snarky comment or a laugh with no joy in it. It made me feel bad."<sup>18</sup>

*Circus Xtreme* was essentially the same themed program that had been presented by the Red Unit since Janu-



Kristen Michelle Wilson

Shannon Kunkle

ary 2015. Although the elephants were taken off the show in May of 2016, the storyline and cast of *Circus Xtreme* was nearly identical to the show that had now been on the road for three consecutive seasons. This was the second time *Circus Xtreme* had played Jacksonville, having visited Veterans Memorial Arena almost exactly two years prior, from January 15-18, 2015.

Despite the fact that some in the arena may have seen a similar show, they had not seen a female ringmaster on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and they responded enthusiastically.

"Jacksonville, are you ready?" Kristen Wilson called during that first Jacksonville performance, as acrobats cartwheeled and horses pranced during the opening spec. "The Feld family is proud to present Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Welcome to *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

"We'll find 1,000 ways to shock and amaze."

The audience answered back in cheers.<sup>19</sup>

The circus has long been a world within itself, insulated from the events of the outside world. That again proved to be the case on Friday January 20. When interviewed months later very few on the show seemed to recall that the circus was in Jacksonville when the nation marked Inauguration Day and Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45<sup>th</sup> U.S. President.<sup>20</sup> It was just a year before, on January 11, 2016, that then-candidate Trump tweeted @RinglingBros is retiring their elephants – the circus will never be the same. Over the years the future President had indicated that he



was somewhat of a circus fan, attending at least one Madison Square Garden performance of the Red Unit prior to entering politics, and in the mid-1980s financially supporting the Big Apple Circus.<sup>21</sup>

It was at Veterans Memorial Arena that one of the traditions of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey returned after an absence of many years. On Saturday January 21, composer Julius Fucik's "Entry of the Gladiators" was added to the musical score as the "Entr'acte" played after intermission and prior to the opening of the second half of the performance. This was the first time in many years that "traditional" circus music was played on the big show. After the first performance of that most famous of circus marches, Brett Barlow sent a note to his band:

"As a musician for the RBBB circus, I've grown accustomed to being taken for granted. Sometimes by my employers, sometimes by the audience. (Never, however by the performers.) It often seemed as if the audience was unaware of our performance. It's the cost of doing business, I suppose. But yesterday, something changed. At the direction of Rye Mullis, our second half overture, known in the biz as the Entre' Acte, was changed. Out was the theme of the show, and in was *Thunder and Blazes, Entry of the Gladiators*. It was stylistically altered to fit the feel of the show, but the melody was unmistakable. Immediately, and I mean immediately, the audience heard it and responded. I could hear audible gasps and cheerful reaction from children of all ages, not to mention the gleeful echoes from Taylor, Sandor, Ivan, and the rest of Clown Alley. Turns out, our audience is savvy after all. They heard the traditional circus music, and responded positively, enthusiastically, genuinely. Long ago, I felt like we should have "leaned in" and embraced our remarkable, unique place in this culture, rather than run away from it, seeking windmill after windmill. Maybe our audience didn't leave us. Maybe, just maybe, it was the other way around."<sup>22</sup>

It wasn't just the addition of classic circus music that was generating enthusiasm among the cast and audience. Kristen Wilson believed that all of the performers were giving a little more than they had before the announcement. "Everyone wanted to kick a little higher and shine a little brighter."<sup>23</sup>

Production Manager Chantal Stringer agreed. "It

helped that the audience increased which helped people feel good about what they were doing. People were thinking 'let's really go out as *The Greatest Show on Earth*'"<sup>24</sup>

**Jan. 25-29 – Tampa, Florida**

**(Amalie Arena) 210 Miles – Railroad: CSX**

**Tickets \$18-85**

More sell-outs were put on the books as *Circus Xtreme* returned to Tampa, where *The Greatest Show on Earth* would give its final performances in Florida. The strong advance sale for the remainder of the season had management advising performers that additional shows would be added to the schedule in the coming weeks. It was also in Tampa that Feld Entertainment advised the parents of children traveling with the show that they would be given assistance in enrolling them in schools after the circus closed in May.<sup>25</sup>

Although *Circus Xtreme* had first opened in Tampa in January, 2015, the show that returned two years later was embraced by the local media, perhaps because of the circus heritage that flows throughout the region. In her review of the show, Sharon Kennedy Wynne of the *Tampa Bay Times* correctly pointed out the differences that traditionalists would see at this performance:

"For guests who haven't been to the circus in a while, the show will feel distant from the Ringling of a generation ago. Circus managers have attempted to keep up with modern tastes by playing up extreme action sports and stunts like the kind you'd see in the X Games. Called *Circus Xtreme*, the show has BMX trick riders, trampoline daredevils, parkour acrobatics, a bungee aerial skydiving display and traditional human circus performers like trapeze artists and clowns."<sup>26</sup>

In Sarasota, home of many circus alumni and enthusiasts, Dahlia Ghabour of the *Herald-Tribune* gushed with delight:

"As soon as Kristen Wilson, the first Ringling Bros. female ringmaster strides out into the ring and bellows 'What's up, Tampa?' you know you're in for a wild ride. The show begins with a massive, sharply choreographed song-and-dance number as they set up the storyline of the show: searching the globe for the next circus sensation.

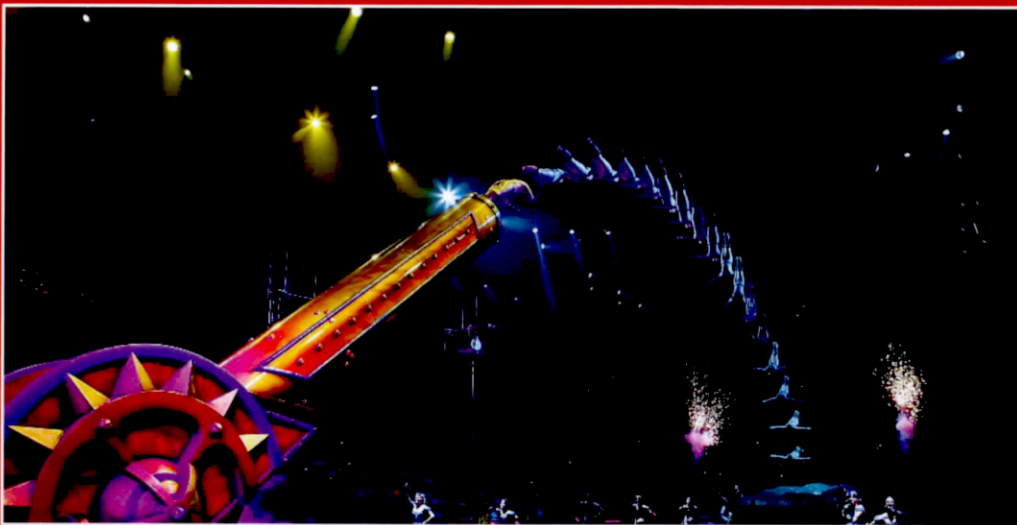
"The acts move rapidly from one to the next, not leaving time for boredom. The 'World Famous Clown Alley' act serves as funny transitions be-





Top, The "Folklore Dancers" shortly before "Nitro Nicole" Sanders is launched as a human cannonball.

Shannon Kunkle



Middle, This time lapse photograph by Amanda Stevens shows "Nitro Nicole" Sanders during one of her final performances as the last Human Cannonball on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

Amanda Stevens



Bottom left, Mustafa Danguir, whose highwire act was a feature on both Circus Xtreme and its predecessor Built to Amaze.

Shannon Kunkle



"The Mongolian Marvels" troupe of acrobats were featured on all three seasons of Circus Xtreme.

Shannon Kunkle



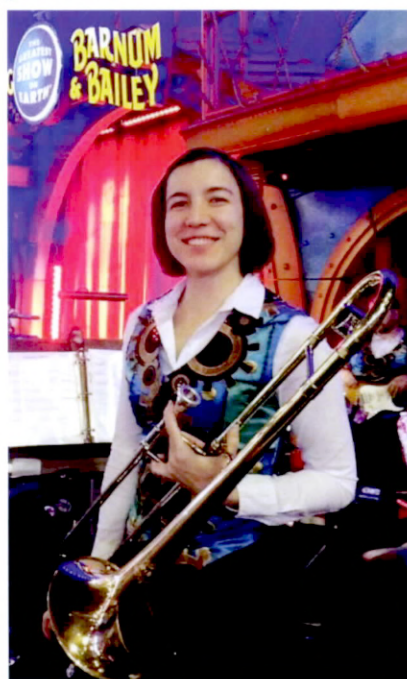
tween larger acts. And knowing that the clowns serve as a distraction as the tech team sets up large equipment in the dark doesn't detract from the thrill when the lighting shifts and shows you what's coming next. *Circus Xtreme* delivers what it promises: an exciting evening full of bright lights and brighter smiles, as children of all ages enjoy a circus wonder for the last time."<sup>27</sup>

A number of former Ringling employees and friends of the show visited in Tampa, including Bello Nock, Roy and Cindy Wells and former Red Unit bandleader Keith Green, but the visitor who created the most buzz was Kenneth Feld who arrived January 26, making his first appearance at the Red Unit since the closing announcement was made.

Feld arrived on Thursday January 26 and spent time talking to the performers and crew. Brett Barlow said Feld stopped in the band dressing room, by himself, specifically to speak with the musicians a couple of hours before the show. "As each of the guys would open the door they would see Kenneth sitting there. They would stop for a second and you could see the look on their face. It was like they were thinking, 'Am I in the right room?'"

Trombonist Megan O'Malley remembers Feld's meeting with the band. "Kenneth didn't seem particularly embarrassed to be in the room with us,"<sup>28</sup> and in a blog posting shortly after he met with the performers and crew she said, "He could have easily stayed away this week. He could have avoided the awkwardness of being here this weekend, of going backstage and being eye to eye with the people he'd just fired.

But he didn't. He took time out of his crazy schedule to be here, not for just an hour or the duration of a show, but for several days. He was here, and if any of us wanted to rant at him or complain to him or smile and shake his hand,



Megan O'Malley

Megan O'Malley

we had the opportunity to do it. That says something. Not every CEO would make time for that."<sup>29</sup>

O'Malley also related a private conversation that she had with Feld in the hallway of Tampa's Amalie Center, "As I passed by he reached out and said, 'I really like your blog,' which I was surprised to hear. He then told me about the things he enjoyed and said 'It is heartbreaking to read, and you give me a sense of what is actually happening on the show. I'm so sorry and thank you for all you have done.'"<sup>30</sup>

It was also in Tampa that Kristen Wilson had only her second meeting with Feld since becoming ringmaster. "He complimented me and said that he had enjoyed himself. It was the biggest honor to receive from someone who had been with it forever."<sup>31</sup>

Nicole Sanders said her conversation with Feld was cordial, but she wasn't sure if he was sincere, "He mentioned that Feld had other shows and he wondered if I might be interested in driving a Monster Truck."<sup>32</sup>

One person who wasn't surprised about Feld's openness to meeting with the staff was Production Manager Chantal Stringer. "He was always down to earth and willing to talk if people approached him."<sup>33</sup>

**Feb. 2-5 – Greenville, South Carolina**  
**(Bon Secours Wellness Arena) 607 Miles**  
**Railroads: CSX, Norfolk Southern**  
**Tickets \$15-60**

Although Monday was a set-up day for most of the crew in Greenville, dozens of members of the Red Unit boarded a convoy of three buses to Charlotte, North Carolina where *Out of this World* was performing at the Spectrum Center.

On Tuesday many of those same "family members" from the Blue show made their way 100 miles southwest to Greenville to see *Circus Xtreme*.

There were big crowds again Tuesday night, another straw house the evening of Friday February 3 and again on Saturday February 4. Day-after-day of sell-out performances also meant more people attending the pre-show. The response from the fans was becoming overwhelming and actually started to create issues with starting the show on time. "The pre-show gave us a chance to talk to people," recalled Irina Prostetsova. "They loved Ringling. Everyone wanted a picture, and it became very difficult to talk to people at every performance who were crying and telling me how much they would miss us."<sup>34</sup>

Ivan Vargas, a sixth generation performer embraced those fans. "I want people to come experience this, even if





*The Red Unit train unloads in Greenville, South Carolina.*

Megan O'Malley



it's for a few hours," he said. There are only a couple months left, and I want everyone to see this great institution before there's no more. It's like inviting people into my home one last time."<sup>35</sup>

It was also in Greenville that trombonist Megan O'Malley's birthday was celebrated by clown alley who made sure that she got "pied," appropriately at "Pie Car Jr."

There was a time when *The Greatest Show on Earth* would welcome another show "day and dating" it, but America's love for football has changed that perspective, at least for one day of the year. On Super Bowl Sunday there was only a 3:00 P.M. matinee, after which many on the show watched the Patriots beat the Falcons 34-28 from a sports bar just down the street from the arena.

**Feb. 8-12 – Greensboro, North Carolina**  
**(Greensboro Coliseum Complex) 189 miles**  
**Railroad: Norfolk Southern – Tickets \$15-100**

En route to Greensboro the Blue Unit's 56 railroad cars passed the 53 car Red Unit train as it was sitting on a



*The Red and Blue Unit trains pass in North Carolina.*

Richard Stringer



sidetrack near Linwood, North Carolina.<sup>36</sup> Although this occasionally happened during a tour, those on the pair of mile-long trains realized it would be the last time ever. "The trainmaster told everyone when the trains were going to pass," said Irina Prostetsova. "Then it is like a telegraph. Someone tells you, then you tell someone else and by the time they approached everyone was ready. I stood with my daughters on the vestibule of Car 29 and we watched and waved as our Blue Unit family sped by."<sup>37</sup>

At the other end of Car 29 Benny Ibarra and Kristen Wilson were also standing on their vestibule. "We were on a sidetrack waiting, and all of a sudden Benny said 'It's coming,'" she recalled. "It was so amazing to see our mirror image zoom by, and then it was gone."<sup>38</sup>

There were big crowds again in Greensboro, and among the thousands who attended the performance at the Coliseum on Wednesday February 8 was Paul Hunt who expressed his sorrow to a reporter from Greensboro's *Fox 8*. "My mom used to bring me and my brothers," Hunt said. "There are kids growing up that won't get to witness the animals, the elephants, the tigers."<sup>39</sup>



It wasn't just ticket scalpers and brokers who were taking advantage of the economic principal of supply and demand. According to a Greensboro television station, the Coliseum itself had substantially increased ticket prices after the show announced it was closing. WFMY-TV reported that two tickets purchased in January for \$80 were now priced at for \$200 for the pair.<sup>40</sup>

**Feb. 15-20 – Atlanta, Georgia  
(Philips Arena) 323 Miles – Railroad: Norfolk  
Southern – Tickets \$28-175**

Atlanta has long been a strong circus town for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. The show's last appearance under canvas in Atlanta occurred at Lakewood Park November 11-12, 1955. According to local circus historian Richard Reynolds, after the show went into buildings in 1957, Atlanta didn't have an arena large enough to accommodate the show. So from 1958 to 1960, the Ringling truck show exhibited outdoors at the Ponce de Leon Baseball Park. For the next 13 years the show skipped Atlanta, finally returning in 1973 with an appearance by the Blue Unit at the then-new Omni. The 103<sup>rd</sup> Edition packed the new downtown arena and it returned year-after-year, first to the Omni, and since 1999 to its successor the Philips Arena. For the past several seasons the downtown engagement has been followed by a second stand at the Infinite Energy Arena in suburban Duluth, Georgia.<sup>41</sup>

The original 2017 route had *Out of This World*, the Blue Unit show, playing the Atlanta dates, and promotional material for the new production was actually printed with both the Philips Arena and The Infinite Energy Arena as the venue. The itinerary had to be changed at the beginning of the year when it was determined the arena in suburban Duluth was not equipped for the ice floor now required for the Blue Unit.<sup>42</sup> As a result the Red Unit was routed back into Georgia for the two dates covering 19 days in February and March.<sup>43</sup> Because of this route change, Atlantans saw *Circus Xtreme* in 2017, the same show, albeit without elephants, that had been presented in the two metro Atlanta arenas almost exactly 12 months before.

The Philips Arena holds about 19,000 for an NBA basketball game, and although some of the seating was draped to create the backstage area, it was one of the larger venues the Red Unit played in 2017, and it was at near capacity for every performance.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the lift that comes from playing to a huge appreciative audience, many on the show were shocked to hear of

the unexpected death of a friend and former colleague Nadia Tarasova. Although she was no longer performing with the circus, she had been with the Red Unit for many years, as a dancer, aerialist and human cannonball. The circus started making plans for a memorial service which would be held after the show moved to suburban Duluth.

Atlanta-based Chick-fil-A has long been a sponsor of Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey, and while the show was in Georgia clowns from the show made 26 appearances at libraries and Chick-fil-A restaurants, promoting the circus' long-time educational outreach program tied to children's literacy.<sup>45</sup>

It was at one of those events that one of the circus clowns was questioned about his plans for the future. Twenty-six year old Ivan Vargas turned the tables on the reporter and instead spoke of the present. "I live in Las Vegas and there is probably a lot of stuff there I could audition for, but right now I am very focused on finishing Ringling Bros. strong and giving 100 percent every performance. Come May, I will figure it out."<sup>46</sup>

**Feb. 23-Mar. 5 – Duluth, Georgia  
(Infinite Energy Center) 0 Miles – Tickets: \$28-103**

After closing at the Philips Center in downtown Atlanta, the performers and props moved to suburban Gwinnett County while the Red Unit train stayed in the Atlanta rail yard for the 10 days the show was in Duluth. Cast and crew traveled by bus from the runs to the arena each day, a trip that could take 45-minutes because of Atlanta's notorious traffic jams.

Show promoters predicted the Atlanta stands would be a success and they were correct. Anticipating the crowds, two shows had been added in January for both of the Sundays that the show was in Duluth. Those additional performances brought thousands more to the arena.<sup>47</sup>

On Saturday February 25 Kenneth Feld along with his wife Bonnie, rejoined the show for the first time since his visit in Tampa in late January. Feld supervised arrangements to bring Nadia Tarasova's husband, aerialist Dima Dolgikh and their young son Sasha, from Philadelphia for a memorial service held after the second show on the arena's third floor concourse.<sup>48</sup>

It was during one of the performances in Duluth, band-leader Brett Barlow was responsible for what he called "the dumbest thing anyone had ever done in my 23 years on the show."

"I thought one of the sound men, Ben Spencer, was





*Top, Nick Lambert joined the Red Unit in November of 2015 and was part of the last group of clowns to perform with The Greatest Show on Earth.*

*Shannon Kunkle*

*Middle, Gabor Hrisafis head-butts Brian Wright during the opening act clown blowoff.*

*Dan Kleintop*



*Bottom left, Clown Gabor Hrisafis does a victory dance during the opening act of Circus Xtreme.*

*Shannon Kunkle*

*Bottom right, Irina Prostetsova was a featured performer on the Red Unit for five seasons, making her debut on Built to Amaze in 2013.*

*Amanda Stevens*







*Irina Prostetsova*

Angelina Hovazhenko

eavesdropping on the closed circuit microphone I used to communicate with the band. At intermission I confronted him and dumped an entire bottle of water on him. What I hadn't realized was that he was standing next to our very expensive monitor console which immediately shorted out the sound for the entire arena. The sound guys lost their minds. They tried to limit the damage but there was nothing they could do. Fortunately there was a spare console and they were able to swap it out as the intermission was stretched. After about 15 minutes we were back in business."<sup>49</sup>

Irina Prostetsova also remembers Duluth for an encounter she hadn't anticipated with Kenneth Feld. "I was very sad at the time. Not only was my future uncertain, but my close friend Nadia had died just a few days before, and now Mr. Feld was there," she said. "I had always thought of him as a superstar, and I was very respectful of him, but after the announcement that the show was closing, I was very angry.

"I had seen him backstage from far away, but I didn't want to talk to him. After the show I stayed in my dressing room for a very long time hoping I could avoid him,"

she reflected. "Finally when I walked out he was standing there and our eyes met. I walked toward him and suddenly I began crying like a child. We were never very close but I always believed that he supported me during some difficult times in my life. I guess I always thought of him as a father figure, and here I was, like a kid crying. It was embarrassing, but he embraced me and held me like I was one of his daughters and he said 'Irina, everything is going to be ok.'"<sup>50</sup>

The show held a barbeque for the staff in Duluth, and shortly after finishing her meal, Kristen Wilson started feeling ill. "I had a terrible feeling of heartburn and I went into the production office to see if either Chantal Stringer or Rob Lange might have some heartburn medication," she recalled. "Both of them asked if I was ok, and told them I wasn't. I loaded up on Tums and I made it through the performance. After that I felt great for the final shows and the train ride to Cincinnati."

**Mar. 10-19 – Cincinnati, Ohio**

**(U.S. Bank Arena) 472 Miles – Railroad: CSX**

**Tickets \$15-68**

On opening day in Cincinnati, bandleader Brett Barlow received a cryptic text from Chantal Stringer. "Do you smell smoke?" Barlow's immediate thought was that the train might be on fire. Another text. "Something is burning." Then he realized what she was saying. Barlow would routinely check in with the Production Manager with a simple question, "Is anything on fire?" It was his way of finding out whether to expect anything unusual in the performance. Today she reached out to him. There was a problem.

"I was told Kristen had a bronchial infection," he recalled. "She wasn't going to be able to perform her duties as our singing ringmaster. Chantal told me that Tabata Maluenda, the daughter of tiger trainer Taba Maluenda, was going to be ringmaster for the Cincinnati opening and probably the next day. I didn't think it was going to work. She had been practicing as Kristen's understudy, but the understudy thing was never taken seriously in the 23 years I was with the show."<sup>51</sup>

Stringer explained how Tabata was chosen for the prominent role. "She had auditioned for the pre-show understudy and we discussed that she might be a possibility to replace Kristen should she become ill. Every week we would do an opening day rehearsal and try to use the understudy to give them the experience of doing the show. By the time we got to Cincinnati she had done a lot of the show, but not all of it."<sup>52</sup>



Despite the challenges facing the 19-year-old she received encouragement from all corners of the show. "I was a little concerned about her doing the countdown," said Human Cannonball Nicole Sanders. "I didn't want her to go too fast or too slow, so we rehearsed once. She did fine."<sup>53</sup>

Production Manager Stringer agreed. "She got it. She knew what was involved and did it. I think she could have either gone out and sold it, or else it would have been too overwhelming. But she did it and she did a good job."<sup>54</sup>

What was originally believed to be a bronchial infection was actually a quite serious gall bladder attack, and Kristen Wilson spent the next week in a Cincinnati hospital on powerful antibiotics, refusing surgery until after the show closed in Providence.<sup>55</sup> Meantime Tabata continued to fill-in as ringmaster throughout the first week of the Cincinnati engagement, announcing the various acts with the musical numbers covered by a recording of Williams that was made months earlier at Feld Studios in Ellenton, Florida.<sup>56</sup>

While in Cincinnati the American Federation of Musicians and Feld Entertainment wrapped up its severance agreement with the musicians on both shows, something that had dragged on in part because there wasn't a clause in the union contract that specifically addressed what would happen if the show closed permanently.<sup>57</sup>

On March 8, former Human Cannonball Brian Miser visited the show and told several people he was considering buying one of the rail cars that would be auctioned when the show closed. Meanwhile the current cannonball, Nicole Sanders told the *Dayton Daily News*, "It's devastating that it's coming to an end. It's more than losing a job – we're like family. You live with each other and interact with each other all day, every day. We love each other and have incredible respect for one another."<sup>58</sup>

Tragedy struck the Mongolian troupe of acrobats while in Cincinnati as one of the cast members died unexpectedly. A traditional Mongolian memorial service was held for her March 18.

As in Atlanta, *Circus Xtreme*, was making its second visit to Cincinnati within the past 12 months, having played the U.S. Bank Arena in March of 2016.

**Mar. 23-26 – Norfolk, Virginia**  
**(Scope Arena) 606 Miles – Railroad: Norfolk Southern – Tickets \$28 and up**

This was the longest run of the season and the train arrived five hours early. While en route to Norfolk several



*Claudia Porter from the Red Unit Wardrobe Department and Susan Burcham, an electrician from the train crew, wave from the Red Unit train.*

Bill Christian

performers were told that they had been granted interviews with a talent scout from Cirque du Soleil who would be visiting the show at the invitation of Feld management and Ringling's Director of Talent Vinicio Murillo.<sup>59</sup> That week the agent for the Montreal-based company was on hand at performances of both the Red Unit in Norfolk and the Blue Unit in Richmond where he interviewed several performers from both circuses.<sup>60</sup>

The Red Unit's *Circus Xtreme* had last played the Scope Arena in 2015 with elephants, and the opening performances were the first in some time that the show wasn't sold out. Friday and Saturday's audiences were lighter than normal, though the two Sunday shows attracted much larger crowds.

While the circus was at the Scope, fire juggler Vicki Zsilak spoke about her experience with *The Greatest Show on Earth*. "This is the best show in the world. They have school and teachers for the family and that's what we have become, one big family. The other acts teach each other and work with the children. It's sad to think about family like that splitting apart."<sup>61</sup>

When the circus set up in big military towns like Norfolk, train maintenance electrician and army wife Susan Burcham would often treat service members and their families to a performance. Because of the increased demand on tickets, her ability to get free or discounted tickets was diminished. "I took a military family of four to the show in Norfolk, and I paid for the tickets myself," she said. "It was ok. I wasn't working for the circus because I was starving to death, I was there because I loved it. The money I made was a bonus."<sup>62</sup>



**Mar. 29-Apr 2 – Hampton, Virginia  
(Hampton Coliseum) 138 Miles – Railroads:  
Norfolk Southern, CSX – Tickets \$20-98**

Although it is only 17 miles from Norfolk to Hampton as the crow flies, there is no railroad bridge between the two towns, so the train traveled north to Richmond on the Norfolk Southern, then south on the CSX to Hampton, a distance of 138 miles, a trip that will take nearly the entire day. The train left Norfolk's Lambert Point Yard at 7:00 A.M. and didn't get spotted in Hampton until 7:25 P.M. Along the way the train made a run through Williamsburg, Virginia where hordes of rail and circus fans greeted the train as performers signed autographs and hundreds snapped photos and shot video of the final circus train to visit the historic community.<sup>63</sup>

While in Hampton, Benny Ibarra, who was performing the Wheel of Death, spoke of his more than 20 years as a circus performer. "It's all my emotions at one time. For example, my act is only five minutes, but my adrenaline goes from 0-to-100."<sup>64</sup>

Another long-time performer, Taba Maluenda talked about his performance, and specifically his relationship with his 14 tigers. "I treat the tigers the same as my son and daughter," he said. "They don't scare me – they trust me. They need to respect me: 'Papa says I can do this, Papa says I can't do that.' In the arena, I'm in charge."<sup>65</sup>

**Apr. 5-9 – Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania  
(Mohegan Sun Arena) 380 Miles – Railroads: CSX,  
Norfolk Southern – Tickets: \$15 and up**



*The Red Unit train traveling from Harrisburg to Wilkes-Barre.*  
Bill Christian

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey had visited the Mohegan Sun Arena 18 times since it opened in 1999 and over the past 28 years the circus had become the facility's second-longest tenured show after the Harlem Globetrotters.

It was in Wilkes-Barre where the Red Unit elephants gave their final performance May 1, 2016, and now almost 11 months to the day animal rights activists were back, some dressed as tigers as a sound truck near the arena blasted the song "We Are the Champions" from loudspeakers.<sup>66</sup>

It shouldn't come as a surprise if this appearance seemed like déjà vu for the cast and audience. Although Tonka, Mable, Asia, Luna and April had left the show after their final performance in the spring of 2016, *Circus Xtreme* had now been booked into the same arena with the same show, sans elephants, for three consecutive years.

A close observer of the 2017 performance would have noticed a couple of minor adjustments in the opening show Wednesday April 5. Benny Ibarra's "Wheel of Death" wasn't quite the same. Benny wasn't feeling well that day and some minor adjustments were made to the act. The good news was that Anna Danguir was back on the high wire with her husband Mustafa following the birth of their son Amir. The couple had exchanged vows the previous July in Houston in a ceremony performed on the high wire, with Mustafa riding into the arena on a camel and Anna doing the splits at the "altar" 30 feet in the air.<sup>67</sup>

The April 5<sup>th</sup> performance was also marked by a heavy downpour. Because of the tight backstage area in Wilkes-Barre, the doors had to be kept open to allow for the BMX bicycle act and others to enter, something that made the backstage area and ultimately the arena floor very slippery. As a result both the tiger and BMX acts were shortened because of the wet arena.

Among those mopping up rainwater and spreading sawdust backstage and on the arena floor was General Manager Rob Lange. "Rob was such a strong leader," recalled Kristen Wilson. "He led by example and consistently demonstrated that none of us was above any job to make the show perfect. He embodied the spirit of teamwork that makes up a circus."<sup>68</sup>

It was also in Wilkes-Barre that some members of the train crew used their ingenuity to fund a party for their department. Raymond Alsby, Junior Sanvictores and D. J. Reynolds had been collecting scrap metal from the rail yards and possum bellies of the Ringling train with the understanding that the steel and aluminum would be thrown away when the cars were sold. After taking the metal to



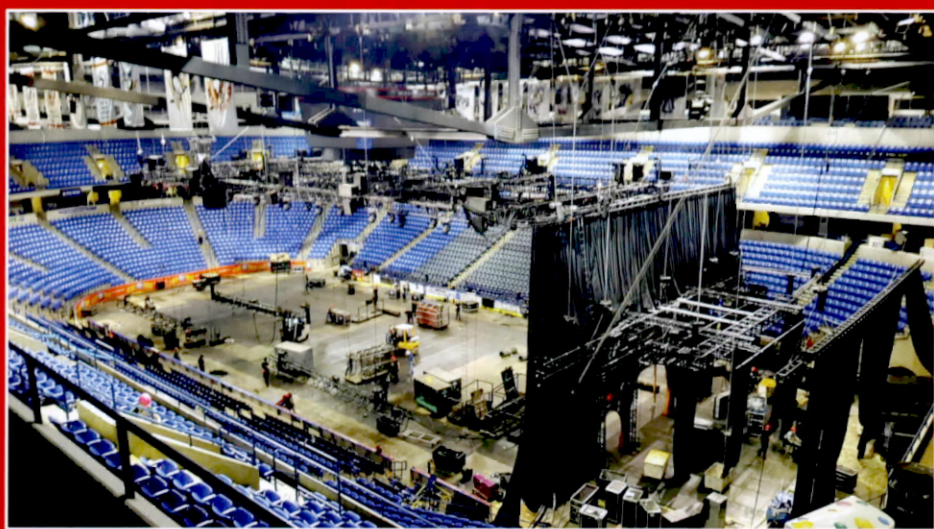


Top, "The Desert Goddesses" camel act was a feature for all three seasons of Circus Xtreme. The six performing camels along with one backup traveled in a special truck built specifically for the act's debut in 2015.

Dan Kleintop

Middle, "The Final Load-in." Dunkin' Donut Center, Providence, Rhode Island. May 3, 2017.

Claudia Porter

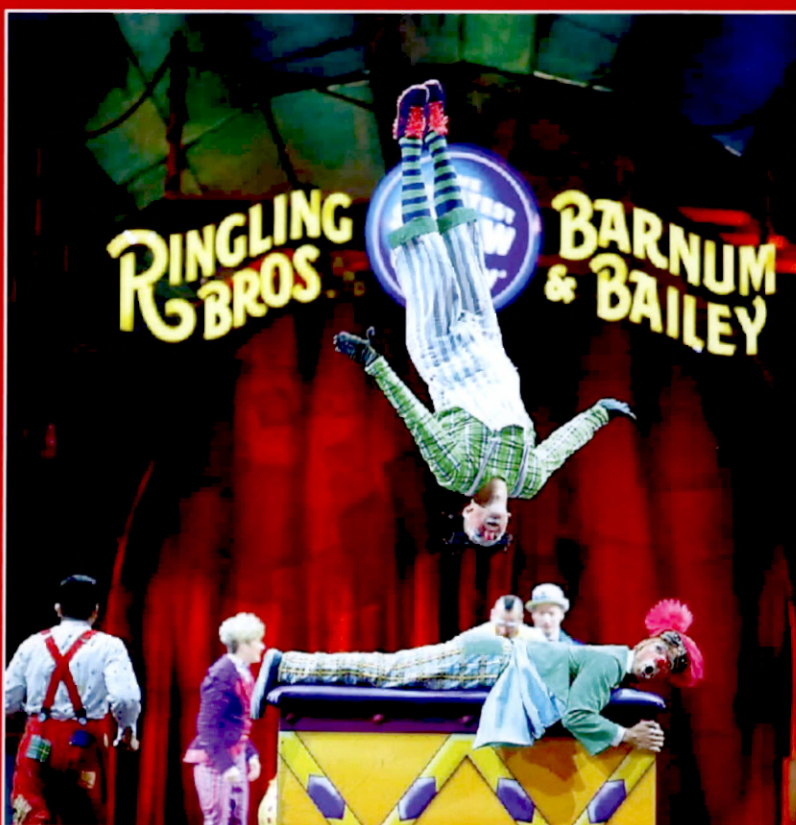


Lower left, clown Taylor Albin flips over Brian Wright during the opening act clown blowoff.

Amanda Stevens

Olha Peresada performs during the "Sirens of the Sea" aerial mermaid act.

Dan Kleintop







*Irina Prostetsova and daughter Valentina enjoy the Easter festivities with Kristen Michelle Wilson.* Angelina Hovazhenko



*Children of Circus Extreme performers after the Easter egg hunt.*

Angelina Hovazhenko



*Father Richard Notter, Father Francis Cranco and Father Jerry Hogan with performers Gabor Hrisafis and Victoria Zsilak.*

Rebecca Williams

a scrap recycling plant they were able to get enough cash to fund a small party for their department near Car 57. Pie Car chef Uncle John Montgomery grilled the steaks, baked potatoes for the crew and prepared Creamicle Jello shots. The party went well into the evening and for the train crew was one of the most memorable events of the season.<sup>69</sup>

**Apr. 14-16 – Worcester, Massachusetts**  
**(DCU Center) 270 Miles – Railroads: Norfolk**  
**Southern, Pan Am Railways**  
**Tickets \$25-170**

One of the highlights of Worcester was the Easter Mass and egg hunt, held before the performances on Sunday April 16, the last day of the stand. Although the egg hunt had become a tradition, the Easter Service was the first for the Red Unit in many seasons.<sup>70</sup>

Father Jerry Hogan has been the national circus chaplain for 24 years having been appointed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. As he spoke with his circus congregation he talked about the importance of family and about the changes that were happening to those who called the circus home. "You'll grow," he told them. "It's not the end of the world. You'll be able to survive this." He also promised to join them for the final stand in Providence.<sup>71</sup>

The Easter party, organized by Rebecca Williams of the Wardrobe Department, is an annual affair which features candy, an egg hunt, and for the first time this year, the Wardrobe Department's Claudia Porter as the Easter Bunny making her arrival on camelback.

Porter was representative of the thousands of behind the scenes heroes whose work over 146 seasons was essential to the performance, yet rarely seen by the public. An eight year veteran of the Red Unit, she followed the same routine in each city. "On load-out I would collect all of the laundry from the dressing rooms," she recalled. "If they went to dry cleaning they would go out when we arrived in the next town. We traveled with four washers and three dryers in big crates. When we arrived at the new arena we would open the boxes, pull out the hoses and connect to the water source. We were entirely self-contained." It was because of the dedication of Claudia Porter and the other seven members of the wardrobe department that the costumes always looked fresh and new, even after weeks on the road.<sup>72</sup>



**Apr. 21-23 – Manchester, New Hampshire**  
**(SNHU Arena) 74 Miles – Railroad: Pan Am**  
**Railways – Tickets \$15-128**

The area around Manchester, New Hampshire had been an important part of the route of *The Greatest Show on Earth* since its earliest days. During the inaugural season of 1871, P. T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Hippodrome traveled throughout New England, and the one-ring wagon show played four New Hampshire cities that August. Manchester was also one of the places that Jumbo visited during his first American tour in 1882, as did Lillian Leitzel in 1910, her first season with Barnum & Bailey. However this time as the trains rolled into the Manchester rail yard it signaled the end of a legacy, rather than a beginning.

It was now only three weeks until *Circus Xtreme*, the Red Unit, would close forever. A big potluck barbeque was planned in the rail yard the night the show arrived, with Benny Ibarra in charge of the grill. Things didn't go according to plan however, and just as the food was nearing its final preparation the skies opened and the cast and crew scrambled for shelter in the vestibules and corridors of the circus train. Circus people adapt to change well and the party continued. Kristen Wilson remembered the evening well. "We listened to music, talked and toasted, and we decided then that rather than focus on the negatives we would turn our final days together into fun. Our toast that night became 'Three weeks of FUN!' which over the next month gradually changed to 'Two weeks of FUN!' and at the end 'One more day of FUN!'"

"It was great," recalled train electrician Susan Burcham. "Everybody was turning every possible negative into a positive and we were able to embrace each other even more."<sup>73</sup>

**Apr. 27-30 – Hartford, Connecticut**  
**(XL Center) 160 Miles – Railroad: Pan Am**  
**Railways, CSX – Tickets \$20-150**

The opening performance in Hartford was very well attended, and after the crowds had left, the Red Unit held its annual "No Talent Talent Show" emceed by clowns Steven Craig and Ben Wright. The private performance included a dance routine by the show's Brazilian dancers and a comedy magic act presented by clown Matthew Lish. There was also an act featuring Claudia Porter and several of the children from the nursery dressed in gowns made of plastic bags used by the Concession Department. Mu-



*The clowns perform on Circus Xtreme.*

Dan Kleintop

sic was abundant that night with Chantal Stringer singing "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess*, accompanied by her husband Richard on guitar and son Liam on trumpet. An ensemble made up of Kristen Williams, Lina Angelina and Truett Adams sang the Christina Aguilera song "Welcome," the same number Williams had sung in her audition to become ringmaster.<sup>74</sup>

For many of those in attendance the lyrics were a poignant reminder of what was to come:

Welcome to the greatest show  
 Greatest Show on Earth  
 You've never seen before  
 Here the fairy-tale unfolds  
 What's behind the smoke and glass?  
 Painted faces, everybody wears a mask.  
 Are you selling them your soul?  
 Well you'll be left out in the cold  
 Is it all blue skies?  
 Fun and games until you fall  
 Then you're left without anyone at all  
 You're riding on a shooting star  
 With a smile upon your face  
 But soon the shine fades  
 And you're left out all alone  
 Wondering where did they all go.

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On Saturday April 29 Benny Ibarra was injured during the Wheel of Death act, and according to bandleader Brett



Barlow tragedy was narrowly averted. "Benny was coming around the circle on the inside and he fell to the ground. He was lucky he wasn't clocked when the wheel came around. As soon as I saw him fall the audience made the noise that it always makes when something goes wrong. I said to the band, 'get ready for Twelfth Street Rag,' the emergency number that would have brought out the clowns." Barlow said that "Twelfth Street Rag" had been the emergency music for the 23 years that he has been with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. "A really good clown knows that when the music starts to grab their clubs and hit the floor, but Benny got up pretty quick and we continued going."<sup>75</sup>

Production Manager Chantal Stringer was also watching the act. "I had never seen that before. I got on the mic and told Brett to move on with Taba's tiger act, then I said 'wait a second, he's getting back on!' Benny finished the act which we didn't expect him to do."<sup>76</sup>

For a number of those with the show, Hartford presented the final time to walk to the old Barbour Street showgrounds, scene of the July 6, 1944 circus fire that claimed 167 lives and injured another 700.

Kristen Wilson was one of those who walked the short distance from the rail yard to the old circus grounds. "That night I was interacting with some of the guests and an elderly gentleman told me our show was only the second time he had ever gone to the circus. The first time was in 1944 when he was 10 years old. Now he was going with his daughter and grandchild. The whole time he told the story there were tears streaming down his face. That final show in Hartford was very emotional for me."<sup>77</sup>

Trombone player Megan O'Malley was also one of those who went to the old circus lot, stopping to read about the disaster on the various memorials that are now on the site and seeing the diagram of where the tents and rings were that day.

"I was pleased to see that where the bandstand had been that day a dogwood tree had been planted," she recalled. "I looked toward the center ring, and tried to imagine it. The relative normalcy of the show, the music moving along smoothly...and then everything changes. And the bandmaster has to make that awful choice, and gives the band the cue to play the Disaster March. There was one more thing to do before I left. I looked around to make sure no one was watching and the kids were far enough away. I pulled out a little token I'd brought, a small jar containing a little vodka. I poured it out around the bandstand tree. Cheers to my windjammer predecessors. See you down the road."<sup>78</sup>

**May. 4-7 – Providence, Rhode Island**  
**(Dunkin' Donut Center) 111 Miles – Railroads:**  
**CSX, Providence and Worcester – Tickets: \$20-178**

This was the final run for the Red Unit, created in 1969 by Irvin Feld as a showcase for Gunther Gebel-Williams. In recent years the show had become a themed production with titles such as *Zing Zang Zoom* and *Built to Amaze*, while an earlier generation had thrilled to Red Unit performances by stars such as Lou Jacobs, King Tusk, David Larible, Dolly Jacobs and Bello Nock.

The train arrived early in Providence, and on the evening of May 3 the entire staff was invited to a final "Cast Party," an elegant dinner staged on the arena floor under fabric ribbons which flowed down from the overhead rigging creating a colorful tent effect, harkening back to the years when the circus was presented under a canvas big top.

"It was a great way to finish," said Production Manager Chantal Stringer. "The arena was transformed by Kathryn Noland into a beautiful intimate venue." Kristen Wilson agreed. "It was a festive party, and everyone was dressed as though it was a black-tie dinner."

After a sumptuous steak dinner washed down with Champagne, the annual staff awards were presented. Among those being "honored" was bandleader and trumpet player Brett Barlow. After 23 years with the Red Unit he received an award for longevity, along with "The David Shipman Award" which is given annually to "the person who did the stupidest thing of the season." It was presented to Barlow for his indiscretion in Duluth, Georgia, where he had dumped the bottle of water into the soundboard during intermission, causing thousands of dollars in damage and tremendous anxiety amongst the sound crew.<sup>79</sup>

The awards were voted on by other members of the cast and crew. Susan Burcham, whose job as an electrician on the train had her up early each morning greeting performers on their way to work was presented with "The Happiest Person in the Morning Award," and one of the most genuine honors went to "Nitro Nicole" Sanders, who was given the "See You Down the Road" award, presented to "the person you would most want to run into after the show closed."<sup>80</sup>

The party continued until very late in the evening, finishing with the "Cupid Shuffle," the traditional music the Red Unit floor crew had played during load-out for nearly a decade. By the time the line dance had finished dozens were on the arena floor, dancing together for the last time.<sup>81</sup>

*The Greatest Show on Earth*, made its first appearance



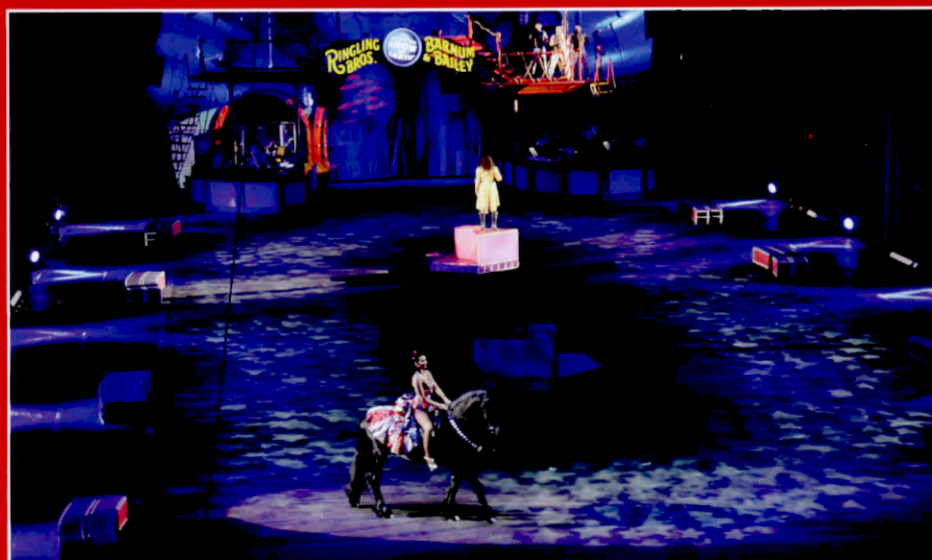


*Taba Maluenda presents the tiger act.*

Dan Kleintop

*As the Red Unit band plays, Ringmaster Kristen Michelle Wilson sings the National Anthem while Jessica Togni rides "Colonel" while led by Alexandre Petrov.*

Dan Kleintop



*The Red and Blue Units meet up in Greenville, South Carolina.*

Megan O'Malley

*Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's first female Ringmaster, Kristen Michelle Wilson.*

Amanda Stevens





in Providence, Rhode Island during its inaugural season of 1871 when it exhibited on June 2-3. For the next 146 years the circus made an annual trek to the Rhode Island capital, where audiences were always supportive. According to the *Providence Journal*, on June 21, 1927, almost exactly 90 years before the final performance of the Red Unit, some 50,000 fans turned out to see the show with 20,000 of them being turned away. Providence also saw one of the final performances under canvas on June 19, 1956, although the show was back in 1957 for a six-day indoor stand at the Rhode Island Auditorium.<sup>82</sup>

The Dunkin' Donuts Center, originally known as the Providence Civic Center, had hosted Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey since the arena opened in 1972, including a performance May 4, 2014 where nine Blue Unit performers were hospitalized when a Human Chandelier act fell from its rigging. Following that accident the circus was fined \$7,000 by OSHA for a safety violations and eight of those performers filed suit against the companies involved in producing the rigging. The performers did not, however, sue the circus.<sup>83</sup>

The final eight performances of *Circus Xtreme* were scheduled in Providence, with the opening Thursday May 4. The morning started with a staff meeting where information was given on the final shows, transportation following the last performance and other details associated with the show closing. Foreign performers without new jobs would lose their work visas shortly after the final show and the Felds would cover plane tickets and reimburse mileage for road trips home.<sup>84</sup>

Following the final rehearsal and a few hours before that evening's performance, the band went to a Mongolian grill called "Fire and Ice," just across the street from the arena. Brett Barlow's memory of that lunch was wistful. "I thought, 'this is it – this is the last time we are going to be together.'"<sup>85</sup>

The show that night was a sellout.

The final six-pack of weekend performances were all straw houses, but for nearly everyone on the show there was a sadness unlike anything ever experienced. "It was a horrible countdown, and you couldn't drag your feet to slow it down," said Megan O'Malley adding, "Usually you would dread a six-pack, but this was one weekend where we had nothing to look forward to. Normally I would say that I wished the day was over, but now I would have worked another six shows, and another 12 and another 18 if it meant I could keep this."<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile the cast and crew were also preparing their

move from the railroad coaches they had called home. "I had a lot of stuff on the train. I got a U-Haul and moved a little every day," said Irina Prostetsova. Yet as Chantal Stringer recalled there was still work to be done, "I was trying not to think about it and get too sentimental. It was on everyone's mind but we still had shows to put on and things to do."

May 7. "Worst. Day. Ever." wrote Megan O'Malley.

"The final time putting on my RBBB *Circus Xtreme* makeup," Ivan Vargas captioned an Instagram photo of himself.<sup>87</sup>

Chantal Stringer said that final day, Sunday May 7, was extremely hectic for those in the front office. "They wanted to take a company photo between shows. On a normal day that is difficult to organize. The Felds were there and everyone wanted to take pictures with them. There were a lot of corporate people there, along with the media."<sup>88</sup>

The cast arrived that Sunday morning knowing their final performances would come within a matter of hours. "It was very hard," said Irina Prostetsova. "My mind had been focused on the fact that I wasn't going to perform any more, but at some time over the past few months I had come to realize that the anger I had when I first heard the announcement was now in the past. I now realized what the most important thing was. It was not performing with Ringling Bros. It was family."<sup>89</sup>

"I drove from the train to the arena with Koji Kraft and Perry Perry from the BMX act, and we were listening to the radio, crying the whole way," said Kristen Wilson. "But once we got there I took a few minutes to lock down my emotions and I think I was able to hold it together through the first two shows. Before the evening show I saw a concession vendor named 'Nixon' sitting by himself on one of the big crates in the back. He had been with Ringling for years. I sat next to him thinking I could give him comfort, but before I could say anything Nixon turned to me and said 'You were a really good ringmaster.' That meant everything in the world to me, and we then cried silently together."<sup>90</sup>

For Brett Barlow the past few months reminded him of a Sesame Street book he used to read his children titled *The Monster at the End of this Book*. The story has the lovable character Grover telling the reader there is a monster coming at the end, building anxiety and anticipation, only to reveal on the final page that the monster is just Grover himself, and maybe not as scary as he might have imagined.<sup>91</sup>

The Red Unit gathered for a final circus mass that Sunday, and heard a prayer from Circus and Traveling Show Ministries' Father Francis Cancro:



"Bless with your holy light concession workers, floor crews, transportation crews and office workers and all who make the world of the circus a reality by their labor.

"Bless those who manifested beauty through the use of their gifts and talents as they walk, run, jump and fly across the sky. Send your angels as their protection."<sup>92</sup>

Dozens of Ringling alumni attended the performances that day, including Chimgee Haltarhuu, a former acrobat with the Mongolian State Circus who flew in from her home in Minnesota to personally thank Kenneth Feld for hiring her in the 1990s. By joining the Ringling circus she was able to leave an abusive marriage in Mongolia where there were no options for victims of domestic abuse. "Ringling saved my life," she said. "We have built a good life. I have a house. I have a good job and a good husband." She now makes an annual trip to Mongolia where she presents free circus demonstrations that allow her to start conversations with women and children about abuse.<sup>93</sup>

The first two shows on Sunday May 7<sup>th</sup> were similar to the others that had been presented that abbreviated season. Benny Ibarra was back on "The Wheel of Death" for the morning show, but missed the afternoon matinee, and the clowns did a walk-around as the band played "Twelfth Street Rag."<sup>94</sup>

Unlike past performances, the evening show on May 7<sup>th</sup> started with Kenneth and Bonnie Feld, along with daugh-

ters Juliette and Nicole on the arena floor, thanking those who had made Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

"It's extraordinary to see this town without a zip code working together, traveling around America and giving an example of team work, camaraderie and family," Feld said to the packed arena.

The show continued to run its course, until the final act before intermission, when Nicole Sanders entered the barrel of her cannon concealing a special surprise for those in attendance. When stage manager Boris Poniatovski fired the cannon, "Nitro Nicole" sailed through the arena spreading a contrail of glitter confetti behind her.<sup>95</sup>

During intermission there was a toast in the band dressing room. Everyone just raised their glasses and no one said anything. According to Brett Barlow there was nothing left to say.<sup>96</sup>

The second half of the show was now underway and the minutes were zooming by. Near the end of the tiger act, emotions got the best of Taba Maleunda who broke down as his cats prepared for their last trick together. Taba was one of the few performers with his own microphone and it picked up a sob that was heard throughout the arena. He summoned one of his 13 tigers down from her perch and buried his face in her fur, then thanked each tiger as it left the cage.

At that point the bald Chilean with a scar on his face turned to his 19-year-old daughter Tabata, who was standing on the other side of the cage door, where she had been since she was seven.

"Tabata, I'm sorry for papa stayed and took care of these animals and forgot about you," he said. "That's never gonna happen again - papa love you." He then knelt and kissed the center of the ring.<sup>97</sup>

As the last performance of *Circus Xtreme* came to a conclusion the band played the finale music, and ringmaster Kristen Michelle Wilson, the show's first and last female ringmaster, invited the entire company to the arena floor where she recognized everyone from the concession and train crew to the nursery school attendants. Then she singled out the floor and backstage workers. "These men and women wear all black and operate in the darkness so that we can shine in the spotlight," she said.<sup>98</sup>

Wilson then sang "Auld Lang Syne" accompanied only by Tom McDonough on piano. As the Feld family joined those on the floor of the arena, those who had made the Red Unit their home said their goodbyes, and the band



Nicole, Juliette, Bonnie and Kenneth Feld with Kristen Michelle Wilson in Providence, RI.

Amanda Stevens



ended the performance by playing "Entry of the Gladiators" one final time.

Those who witnessed the last performances of *Circus Xtreme* or *Out of This World*, either in person or online, saw the finale of a grand circus parade that began 146 years earlier when P.T. Barnum was coaxed back into the circus business by William Cameron Coup and Dan Castello. Over the years the spectacle was guided by James A. Bailey, the Ringling brothers, John Ringling North and the Felds.

This magnificent parade that ran nearly 150 years featured a kaleidoscope of circus talent never duplicated nor equaled. From Leitzel and Codona to Concello, Gaona and Vasquez, year after year the lofty domes of tents and arenas were filled with those who performed where angels feared to tread. From Mabel Stark to Alfred Court, Charly Baumann to Gunther Gebel-Williams, they all controlled the center ring while presenting animals that could be trained but never tamed. And the laughter produced by Lou Jacobs, Emmett Kelly, Otto Griebling, Bello Nock, Barry Lubin and an army of clowns will never be matched.

Merle Evans and the dozens of musicians who played continuously throughout performances had created the atmosphere for tens of thousands of performances that featured May Wirth, the Cristianis, Bird Millman, Unus and Con Colleano, just a handful of the hundreds of performers who became household names based on their skill and daring. Their work was enhanced by hundreds of showgirls and dancers choreographed and costumed by those such as Richard Barstow, John Murray Anderson, Miles White and Don Foote.

And there were those who made it tick. Fred Bradna and Count Nicholas. Tim Holst, Bob Dover and Harold Ronk, along with Tuffy Genders, Rudy Bundy, and dozens of other names that are fading from memory such as Pat Valdo, Noyelles Burkhart, Jimmy Whalen, Roland Butler, John Snellen and Babe Boudinot. If they were the greatest in the world of circus, ultimately they were part of *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

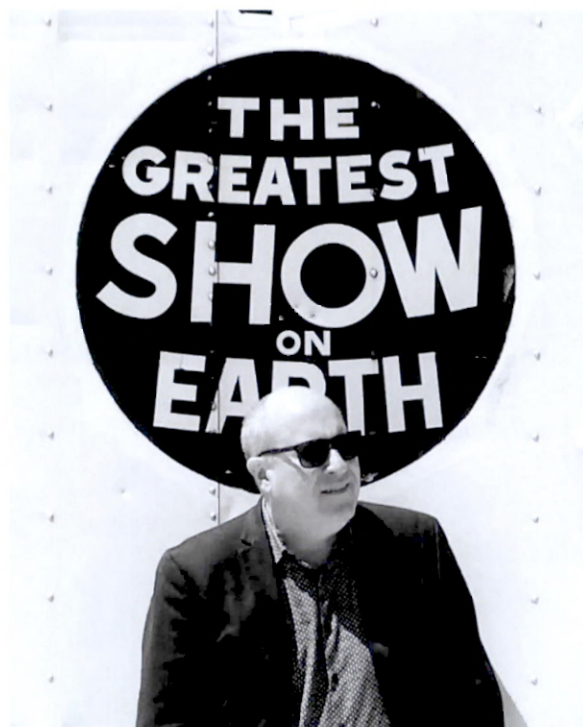
Of course there were literally thousands behind the scenes who moved and built the show, cared for the animals and fed those who traveled with it, along with those who sold concessions and drove wagons or worked two weeks ahead of the show, posting lithographs for performances they never saw. Each of them is a part of the legacy and history of what was once billed as "The World's Grandest, Largest, Best, Amusement Institution," which it was for seven generations.

As Peggy Williams remarked after spending 48 years

with the circus, "Truth be told, all of us who worked at Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey should be grateful for the opportunity to have been among the colorful threads in the fabric of *The Greatest Show on Earth*."

"We never say goodbye to the circus life," Kristen Michelle Wilson reminded the crowd as she removed her ringmaster top hat one last time. "All we can say is we'll see you down the road. So ladies and gentlemen. Children of all ages. Thank you. We'll see you down the road."<sup>99</sup> **BW**

### About the author



Dana Barnum

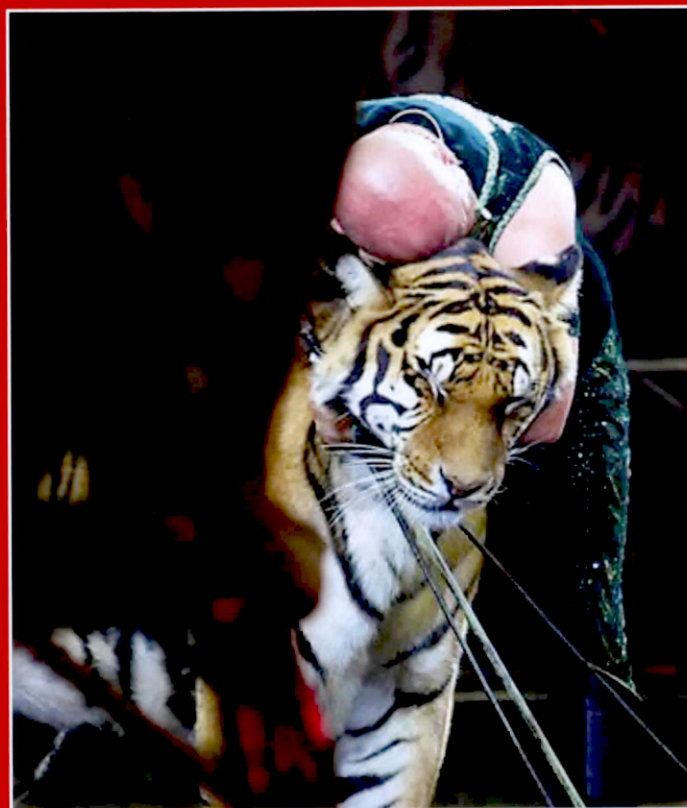
*Chris Berry's two passions are broadcasting and the circus — though not necessarily in that order. Growing up just outside of Sarasota, Chris had the opportunity to meet some of the great circus stars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the fire was lit. By the time he was 14 Chris was a member of the Circus Historical Society and a regular volunteer at the old Circus Hall of Fame. Chris' interest in circus history and expertise in the area of circus lithographs blossomed as he was mentored by some of America's most respected circus historians. Following a career with CBS and ABC where he held executive positions in Los Angeles, Washington DC, New York and Chicago, Chris now serves as Senior Vice President at iHeartMedia where he oversees the radio giant's national news operation and manages NBC News Radio, dividing his time between gathering and distributing the news of today, and researching the history of the circus in America.*





*Irina Prostetsova performs on May 4, 2017 in Providence.*

Amanda Stevens



*Taba Maluenda performs in Providence.*

Amanda Stevens



*The train crosses the Tunkhannock Creek Viaduct in Pennsylvania.*

Bill Christian



# RINGLING BROS.

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GREATEST SHOWS**

**THE YEAR'S BEST HOLIDAY**

AFFORDING MORE GENUINE PLEASURE AND RECREATION THAN ANY OTHER EXHIBITION EXTANT.





Circus Historical Society Annual Convention  
July 18-21, 2018      Baraboo Wisconsin  
Registration Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Guest(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State/Prov. \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

Country \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone \_\_\_\_\_ Cell phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Registration fees [Member or guest(s)]      \$130.00 each # \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Registration fees [Non-member]      \$190.00 each # \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_

*Registration fees include a Circus World Museum pass good all days and a tour of the Circus World Museum library*

**Late Registration Fees**

After June 18 and before July 8      \$50.00      # \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_

On or after July 9      \$75.00      # \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Al. Ringling Theatre tour ticket(s)      \$15.00      # \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Extra banquet ticket(s)      \$30.00      # \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**TOTAL** *(check or money order payable in US dollars to Circus Historical Society)* \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Special dietary needs? None ☐ Gluten free ☐ Kosher ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Other ☐ Specify \_\_\_\_\_

**Cancellation Policy**

Cancellation request submitted before June 18, full refund.

Cancellation request submitted after June 18, full refund  
less \$25.00 processing fee.

Cancellation requests submitted after July 9 or no show,  
NO REFUND.

**Questions? Assistance?**

Address all convention questions, assistance or special  
requests to:

circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com

Mail completed registration form,  
with check or money order:

**Circus Historical Society  
c/o Robert Cline  
2707 Zoar Road  
Cheraw, SC 29520-4133**



# Circus Historical Society

## 2018 Annual Convention

### July 18-21, 2018

Four long railroad trains hauling Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows departed from Baraboo, Wisconsin in the spring of 1918, some to support the indoor opener at the Chicago Coliseum on April 20, with the remainder departing for the under-canvas debut at St. Louis on May 7. They never returned to Baraboo, going to Bridgeport at the end of the season, emerging the next year as Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, the *Greatest Show on Earth*.

A century later, on July 18-21, 2018, the Circus Historical Society will stage an annual ritual by convening its national convention in Baraboo. Local institutions and residents are ardently looking forward to hosting the meeting and making possible an event that will be remembered for many years.

Convention check-in commences at noon, Wednesday, July 18, in the Clarion Hotel lobby, continuing through 5:00 PM. Late arrivals can also garner their registration packets on the following day. Plan to arrive early to take advantage of included arrival day afternoon activities. A separate, additional charge will be incurred at registration time for the historic circus homes tour. Details could not be finalized by publication deadline.

The abundant circus history, heritage and legacy present in the city will be celebrated over a span of four days. The heart of the assembly will be four sessions of presentations on Thursday and Friday, July 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. One will focus on local and Wisconsin circus history. Another will be on women of the circus, with a largely female slate of presenters. Two panel discussions are currently being planned, one whereby managers of the largest publicly-accessible collections will make attendees aware of the latest developments and acquisitions.

You'll hear about the 1933 RBBB Golden Anniversary engagement and the back story to it. See the day's events captured in the film made by trapeze great Alfredo Codona! The balancing act of simultaneously being a globe of death rider, wife and mother will be related by another presenter. Tall tales of Texas circus lore is another prospect, along with a peek into the organizing of the 1910 Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Enormous Shows United sideshow. In total, the sessions will be a diverse and interesting agenda of new and

unique works that advance understanding and interpretation of circus history.

Local flavor features include a special tour of the recently restored and truly resplendent Al. Ringling Theatre, America's oldest and among the most elegant of motion picture palaces. A tour of multiple circus proprietor homes, several never before available to public access, is also being arranged. Registrants can also take part in a tour of the local cemetery, using a newly produced guidebook.

Registrants will receive a ticket to Circus World Museum that will serve as an entry pass to the world-class attraction throughout the duration of the event. The Thursday, July 19, Baraboo Concert on the Square will feature a rain or shine performance by Prof. Gerald Stich's Circus Band.

The annual convention program and banquet will be held on Friday evening, the 20<sup>th</sup>, the agenda including special recognitions, the much-anticipated awarding of the annual Stuart Thayer Prize and a very special guest speaker.

Baraboo's Big Top Circus Parade & Circus Celebration will roll through the street on Saturday morning, July 21, starting precisely at 11:00 AM. The middle of the day is at will, time to visit the museum, fellowship, or to take advantage of local attractions. The annual CHS Benefit Auction, a rollicking happy event with rare and unusual gems at bargain prices, will be held on Saturday evening.

Members and others desiring to donate materials for sale at the auction can bring them with them to the registration table, or transfer them after arrival. Those planning to ship parcels of auction items in advance are requested to first send a notice to [circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com).

Baraboo is a modest-size, safe community in largely agricultural and picturesque south-central Wisconsin. There is little traffic, no parking issues of consequence, and the locals are pretty friendly folks that are more than willing to help visitors. Remember, the nascent state legislature adjourned in the 1840s to patronize one of the first menageries to tour the state. Badgers love visitors! The closest airports are Madison, Milwaukee and Rockford, IL. The closest Amtrak stops are at Wisconsin Dells and Portage. Check in advance for the best method to reach the city from your arrival point. There is local taxi service in Baraboo, at modest rates. Driving access is via Interstate 90-94 and other state highways. Members with vehicles will usually be happy to carpool and give rides, the distances between various activity locations being only for the heartiest of walkers.

CHS conventions are enriching and engaging events. Enjoy the one in 2018 even more by your participation in the program, or by volunteering to serve in the daily opera-



tions. Assistance is always welcome.

Address all convention questions, assistance or special requests to: [circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com) or call 608-356-1030 during normal business hours (CST).

Those registrants desiring to accomplish research at the Circus World Museum library are urged to make their own arrangements directly with Pete Shrake, Archivist, at 608-356-8341 or [pshrake@circusworldmuseum.com](mailto:pshrake@circusworldmuseum.com). Pete is wearing several hats during convention time and library hours will be truncated from their normal operation.

### Cancellation Policy

- Cancellation request submitted before June 18, full refund.
- Cancellation request submitted after June 18, full refund less \$25.00 processing fee.
- Cancellation requests submitted after July 9 or no show, NO REFUND.

### Hotel

Book your reservation now at the Clarion Hotel; 626 West Pine Street; Baraboo, Wisconsin, 53913,

telephone 608-356-6422. With two queen-size beds per room, the rate is \$129.00 per night (\$143.84 total with fees and taxes). **Reservations should be made directly with the hotel** (not through the Clarion website or reservation center). Tell the reservation desk that you request the **Circus Historical Society room block** to receive the specified rate. Room reservation cut-off date is June 1. Rooms are limited, immediate reservations are recommended.

### Convention Check-in

Convention check-in commences at Noon, Wednesday, July 18, in the Clarion Hotel lobby. Plan to arrive early to take advantage of included arrival day afternoon activities. A separate, additional modest charge will be incurred at check-in time for the historic circus homes tour, if you desire to participate.

### Questions? Assistance?

Address all convention questions, assistance or special requests to [circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com)

**The Registration Form can also be found online at [www.circushistory.org](http://www.circushistory.org)**



Ringlingville, Baraboo, WI

courtesy of Paul Young



## Acknowledgements

This record of the final season of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus could not have been possible without the assistance of the following individuals:

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May All Your Days Be Circus Days